LEGBA'S CROSSING

NARRATOLOGY IN THE AFRICAN ATLANTIC

Heather Russell

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Legba's Crossing

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Narratology *in the* African Atlantic

Heather Russell

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For my daughter "Nina"
Rachel Allison Andrade
May you always walk a path with heart . . .

For Tun . . . and all the ancestors . . .

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Legba's Crossing

Haiku in Red and Black

1.
I know this path well
the familiar contours
of your grand designs.

The night falls sharply, smoke bombs
explode like gunpowder.

2.
I shapeshift, retreat
to safe houses on the road
hedged with broken glass.

Restive Archipelagos
history nods, one eye open.

3.
I wake at cock's crow
you at my door, resplendent
in the Georgia sun!

We journey on, words and worlds
unfurling like red ribbons.

—Donna Aza Weir-Soley

Definitions belong to the definers, and not the defined.
—*Beloved*, Toni Morrison

Eshu-Elegbara . . . sometimes "wears" the crossroads as a cap, colored black on one side, red on the other, provoking in his wake foolish arguments about whether his cap is black or red, wittily insisting by implication that we view a person or a thing from all sides before we form a general judgment.
—*Flash of the Spirit*, Robert Farris Thompson

To be free is very sweet.
—*The History of Mary Prince*, Mary Prince

Introduction

Critical Paradigms in Race, Nation, and Narratology

The noted literary scholar Fredric Jameson has argued that "the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right" (79).[1] Literary analysts, Jameson notwithstanding, often regard stylistic or formal elements as mere functional extensions of an aesthetic or narrative text's thematic concerns. In criticism of the literatures of the African diaspora, privileging theme, content, and meaning over in-depth formal analysis has too frequently textured academic inquiry. The eminent scholar of African American autobiography William Andrews thus justly observes that expressive cultural critics have devoted far "too little attention to the social, historical or ideological significance of the *forms* of black narrating."[2] To this end, the principal contention of *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic* is that African Atlantic

narratives, through their narratology, frequently and by necessity posit fundamental, ideological contestations of Euro-American discursive and epistemological formations.

Conventional literary forms take shape in accord with widely agreed-upon rules, or social contracts.[3] Breaking such traditional or canonical social contracts becomes integral to the liberating, revolutionary poetics of form engendered by African Atlantic narratology. Grand narratives of enlightenment, rationalism, and civilization are quintessentially linear; they chronicle a seemingly ordained movement from proverbial darkness to transcendent light, from unknowingness to certain knowledge, from formlessness to perfect form. Such linearity coupled with its dichotomizing imperatives attends as well the discourses of slavery, white supremacy, and colonialism. I am thinking here, for example, of pseudoscientific discourses of black inferiority, concepts such as "the white man's burden," "the civilizing mission," and the like. Hegemonizing discourses such as these are marked by what Audre Lorde calls the "linear power . . . defined by profit" and "institutional dehumanization" (*Sister Outsider* 39); or what Edward Said describes as the discourse of "*we* are this" and "*they* are that" (237). African Atlantic narratives seek often and persistently to formally disrupt linear, prescriptive constructions.

Invariably as well, the formal eruptions of the African Atlantic are primarily concerned with destabilizing what Edouard Glissant in *Caribbean Discourse* defines as the idea of "a single History." Crossing texts fissure "History"[4] through the discursive interventions of "histories" (93). As J. Michael Dash observes of Glissant's recognition of "the falsifying symmetry of history as linear progression" within such a totalizing paradigm: "History as system attempts to systematize the world through ethnocultural hierarchy and chronological progression" (*Caribbean Discourse* xxix).

Thus it would seem that the idea of History ever "marching forward" is an apt formulation to describe the (in some cases quite literally) militaristic suppression of alternative versions of "what happened," a suppression administered by those who wield power over the production and mass dissemination of discourse. Counterhistorical versions produced by those subjected to the violence of Euro-American imperial and racist behaviors and the linear, progressive, chronological discourses that support them have historically fought from the margins. Their battle has been to quite

simply be seen. It is important to note, however, that the histories engaged in "fissuring History" are simultaneously engaged in a twofold process. The first is, of course, to present histories that thematically, substantively, and perhaps even ethically challenge conventional ethnocentric exclusionary History; the second, and this is most germane to my formulations, is to discursively interrogate the entire matrix of Historiography. In other words, it is not enough simply to replace History with a more ideologically compelling version using the same systems governed by "ethnocultural hierarchy and chronological progression." Rather, the very logocentricity of these systems must be interrogated, disrupted, and reformulated.

Like Glissant, I see the linkages between History and Literature in this regard as practically interchangeable.[5] The hegemony of Literature has indeed been fissured by literatures emerging from and concerned with African Atlantic experience, and it is precisely such instantiations that I am tracing here in the hope of theorizing energetic ruptures, fissures, and formal departures that fundamentally challenge Euro-American logocentricity. Instances of generic transgressions within African Atlantic creativity suggest a politically inflected, self-reflexive, diasporic consciousness that acknowledges the radical contingencies of meaning. Within such literatures, there is a concomitant commitment to decentering discursive hegemony—such as the idea of "a single History." At the same time, African Atlantic narratives are normally created out of and indeed crafted to address material conditions that warrant determinacy. By this I mean these narratives' chosen advocacy for principles such as *liberation*, *freedom*, *democracy,* and *enfranchisement*, all of which require immersion in the material contexts of their cultures. African Atlantic texts are charged with articulating material truths while simultaneously destabilizing Grand Narrative determinism.

The narratives under exploration in this study strive to dismantle structural hegemonies through both materialist immersion and formal innovation. The discursive clash, the epistemological dialectic, is played out in their narratology through their formal departures and arrivals, their attempts to balance formal indeterminacy with material realities shaping African Atlantic experience. Their work is accomplished through paradigms they employ for imagining national, racial, and individual formations, and even through moments of textual "implosion" (moments beyond which a

text fails to imagine alternative discursive models) regarding African Atlantic national/racial consciousness.

The forms of narration employed by the writers whose exemplary work I examine metonymically engage possibilities for national development, whether in the Caribbean or the United States, in postemancipation, postindustrial, postindependence, and post–Civil Rights contexts that frame contemporary, diasporic, black material and expressive production. Contemporary postcolonial, African American, and African diaspora criticism has frequently examined the role of the *border* in metaphoric, cultural, linguistic, and legal terms.[6] In the following chapters, I specifically explore border crossings of conventional formal, generic, and disciplinary rules. Mine is a project in what might be called black narratology. My overarching contention, then, is that formal contestations embodied in African Atlantic narratives produce liberating spaces, creating multivocal quiltings for new national, global, and diasporic possibilities.

African Atlantic Modernisms

Analyses of revisionist formal structures in texts concerned with African Atlantic experience have frequently invoked modernism as a productive frame of reference. Such studies have taken as their central claim that Euro-American definitions of modernism are inadequate to fully capture the aesthetic, political, thematic, and material concerns of black writers and artists. For example, in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* Houston Baker Jr. describes "Afro-American modernism" as a strategic exercise in "*the mastery of form* and the *deformation of mastery*" that is "not confined to a traditionally defined belles lettres or to Literature with a capital and capitalist L" (8). Black artists' formal engagement in the modernist enterprise, Baker argues, begins not with bourgeois "anxiety" about reproducing preexistent and outmoded forms, but rather with structurally addressing the realities of black economic disenfranchisement. As a consequence, Afro-American modernism is implicitly vested with a politico-economic significance tangibly grounded in black uplift. Baker yokes this materially inflected formulation to a concomitant need to *de-form* "mastery,"

fissuring the capitalistic imbrications of Literature, and in turn positing a potentially liberational African American modernism.

In a similar vein, Simon Gikandi in *Writing in Limbo* argues convincingly against jettisoning modernism as a viable lens through which to theorize Caribbean writing. Gikandi insists that Caribbean writers, "haunted" by European colonization, can neither "adopt" nor "escape" European modernism, particularly because of the *revisionary* cast of their writing (3). Caribbean modernism does evolve, on the one hand, from "anxiety," albeit an anxiety linked to the historical realities of colonial domination; at the same time, it is precisely this "colonial anxiety" that produces, Gikandi argues, the inevitable subversion of form and language that is requisite to challenge colonial hegemonic structures (11–12). Both Baker and Gikandi invoke and then signify on modernism, insisting upon historical specificities of race/ethnicity and attenuating forms of Euro-American subjugation that in turn foster or produce an emancipatory African Atlantic (African American and Caribbean) modernism.

The beginning of Earl Lovelace's *Salt* (1997), in which the narrator begins to tell the story of Trinidadian enslavement and resistance, is illuminating in its embodiment, precisely, of such emancipatory poetics:

> Watch the landscape of this island . . . and you know they coulda never hold people here surrendered to unfreedom . . . there was no natural subservience here. Nobody didn't bow down to nobody just so . . . Four hundred years it take them to find out that you can't keep people in captivity. Four hundred years! And it didn't happen just so. People had to revolt. People had to poison people. Port-of-Spain had to burn down. A hurricane had to hit the island. Haiti had to defeat Napoleon. People had to run away up the mountains. People had to fight. And then they agree, yes. We can't hold people in captivity here. But now they had another problem: it was not how to keep people in captivity. It was how to set people at liberty. (5–7)

Here Lovelace's rewriting of the British Emancipation project (which involved both the Slave Trade Act of 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833) in terms that decenter British Enlightenment philosophy and center Caribbean resistance to enslavement is a significant though certainly not unprecedented act of historical revisionism. And yet, the form

within which Lovelace does so, as I shall discuss further in Chapter 4, is unequivocally revisionist. *Unfreedom* is to slavery as enslaved subject is to slave. Through his deployment of Trinidadian vernacular, humor, and satire, Lovelace's rewriting of Caribbean resistance to enslavement is not simply revisionary history but is rather revisionist historiography—his is a culturally inflected version narrated in direct opposition to the formal discourse governing official accounts of Emancipation. Additionally, the semantic (and I would add seismic) shift from the concept of *being freed from captivity* to the notion of *being set at liberty* is fully imbued with the material implications set out by Baker's formulations. The "new problem" of how to set African Atlantics at liberty explicitly debunks the Grand salvific Narrative of Emancipation, foregrounding in its stead the continued disenfranchisement of African Atlantics in the aftermath of its passage. Lovelace's is revisionist literary/historiography in action.

Let me return for a moment, though, to the privileging of modernism as the vehicle through which we arrive at conceptual frameworks of African Atlantic narratology such as I have offered above. What I would like to propose, despite modernism's irrefutable efficacy, is a specifically West African and African diasporic epistemological framework through which to read the production of precisely the emancipatory or liberational poetics with which African Atlantic modernism is concerned, a framework that at the same time challenges the notion that Africa must somehow be sloughed off or relegated to the sphere of the "premodern" in order to arrive at modernity. With regard to this latter point, I am referring to contemporary models of black modernity, where references to Africa are often defined and hence rejected as romantically nativist and implicitly naïve notions of symbolic return.

For Glissant, Africa is "the inaccessible land," a land that creates an "unceasing tug . . . against which we must paradoxically struggle to take root in our rightful land" (160–61). Africa is for Gikandi a place toward which the Caribbean writer is invariably drawn but cannot look to for a "rescue plan"—"a prelude to the adventure of Caribbean modernity" (10). If gestures toward Africa *are* proposed and not implicitly dismissed as romantic, chimerical, or both, they are labeled as and unsuitably situated within traditional Afrocentric theoretical models, and *then* they are summarily dismissed. Hence, the question we are left with, it seems to me, is whether there is a place for invoking Africa that has nothing to do with nostalgia.

For *both* ideas, the modernist notion of a premodern "originary" Africa and the nationalist concept of Afrocentricity, are surely, albeit to varying degrees, rooted in nostalgia.

Is *the unceasing tug of Africa*, against which Glissant insists the New World African subject must paradoxically struggle, principally and solely about negotiating the original trauma of capture, transportation, and enslavement, *or* is it possible that like the concomitant and acceded-to tug of Europe, the tug of Africa is equally steeped in theoretical/discursive and epistemological formulations that shape and inform African Atlantic subjectivity and its expression?[7] Let me hasten to add at this point that the subsequent models I propose are not intended to reify antimodernist perspectives, nor are they intended to simply replace current efficacious scholarly models.[8] My analyses are, however, guided by the proposition that formal innovations such as those I analyze in chapters that follow are as decisively functions of *the tug of West Africa* and its African Atlantic corollaries as they are of African Atlantic modernist revisionism. It is perhaps fitting, then, that I employ two classic tropes within African Atlantic modernism to inaugurate my subsequent analyses: Wilson Harris's *limbo gateway* and Houston Baker Jr.'s *railroad crossing*.

Legba

The Caribbean limbo dance is said to have originated during the middle passage as a mechanism by which enslaved Africans moved in the face of limited space. In its New World configuration, the dancer moves under a gradually lowered pole until he assumes a spiderlike position of maneuvering through the use of his limbs under the pole. Wilson Harris invokes the "spider metamorphosis" inherent to the limbo dance to metaphorize Caribbean modernity: "Limbo then reflects a certain kind of gateway to or threshold of a new world . . . [it] is not the total recall of an African past . . . since that African past . . . was modified or traumatically eclipsed with the Middle Passage and with the generations of change that followed. Limbo was rather the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures" (158).[9] For Harris, the limbo dance as metaphorical gateway between Africa and the New World enacts at once the

disassemblage of strictly African identities and the potential assemblage of New World identities.

Even more important, the "limbo imagination" that emerges as a consequence of this Trans-Atlantic de-formation and re-formation of identity becomes the mechanism by which New World subjects negotiate the "violations of slavery and indenture and conquest" (Harris 160). In other words, like their physically confined predecessors, cramped in Middle Passage spaces determinedly resisting and innovatively navigating the literal containment of their bodies, their New World descendants also developed strategies for moving against and under the hegemonic strictures of slavery, colonialism, and their aftermaths. What I am keenly interested in, though, with regard to Harris's formulation, is the juxtaposition of the linear, phallocentric limbo pole metaphorically pressing down upon the moving, resisting, and multilimbed African Atlantic body. Such dexterous subversion seems an apt metaphor to capture the resistance to linearity, the fissuring of Literature/History that frequently attends African Atlantic discourse. The successful limbo dancer, in the end, glides untouched (though not unscathed) under the encroaching pole.

In a similar vein, the successful blues singer and his song "never arrest transience," nor "fix it in 'transcendent form'" (Baker, *Blues* 7). For Baker, the blues matrix is the sign of African American modernity. Within this matrix, the black blues singer is situated at the juncture of the railway and its crossing, and, like the limbo dancer, innovatively and deftly navigates "injustice, despair, loss, absence, denial," through his cultural performance—in the end transliterating torment into "conditions of possibility" (7). The blues singer and his expressive power, like that of his Caribbean counterpart, are starkly juxtaposed against the hard, linear, metallic rails of the railway track, tracks that bespeak a history of Jim Crow racism, exploitation of labor, and the rise of modern capitalism.

And yet, such tracks invoke a concomitant history of black resistance to subjugation: the famous nineteenth-century fugitive from slavery, Henry "Box" Brown, who shipped himself by rail from Virginia encased in a box marked "dry goods" and arrived to freedom in Philadelphia; and the underground railroad, which, though obviously not a literal railroad, served as radical signifier of organized resistance to enslavement, are just two such brief examples. Most significantly, though, the polyfluent poetic lyricism of the blues singer standing at the railway junction is vested with a

definitive polyvocality that vastly contrasts the commercial/capitalist fixity of the railroad enterprise and the firmly staked discourse that implicitly attends the discourse of progress, embodied in and by the railroad tracks at whose crossing he performs: "Polymorphous and multidirectional . . . the juncture is the way-station of the blues . . . the singer and his production are always at the intersection, this crossing, codifying force, providing resonance for experience's multiplicities" (Baker, *Blues* 7). Harris's invocation of the "gateway" and Baker's employment of the "crossing" as tropes that encapsulate African Atlantic modernity share more than deep structural commonality. Both tropes share epistemologically and conceptually aspects of the West African god Esu-Elegbara and his New World corollaries: Exù, Elegua/Ellegua, and Legba.

According to the Yoruba, Esu-Elegbara is the god of the crossing. He is the gateway god. He is the god who is the divine linguist, vested with the power to govern over hermeneutic and heuristic processes.[10] Esu or Eshu, as Esu-Elegbara is sometimes called, operates in the Yoruban pantheon as god of the crossroads—residing literally at the gateway, the interstices of truth, meaning, and interpretation. For the Fon of Benin, Esu/Eshu's corollary is Legba. Eshu and Legba are often interchangeably used; they serve ostensibly the same function in relation to discourse.[11] Theorizing such discursive principles in terms of African American vernacular signification, Henry Louis Gates maintains that the Yoruban Esu-Elegbara is "Our metaphor for the uncertainties of explication, for the open-endedness of every literary text . . . Esu rules the process of disclosure, a process that is never-ending, that is dominated by multiplicity. Esu is discourse upon a text; it is the process of interpretation he rules" (21). Thus Legba's (or Esu's) power is derived from his strategic duality—his mastery of discourse and attendant recognition of its gross limitations.

Additionally, Legba is often considered the quintessential tricky shape shifter. Erik Davis, for instance, argues that "Eshu (Legba) is a trickster not just because he fools people and creates chaos, but more profoundly because he is always escaping the codes he simultaneously reinforces" (5). In other words, Legba's purpose as god of the crossroads is to remind us that power is derived from a simultaneous affirmation and subversion of discursive codes. It is not so much, then, that he shifts his own shape (though he does so at times); it is that he shifts the *shape* of received knowledge. As a consequence, the idea of African Atlantic modernity as qualitatively

engaged in fissuring Master Narratives is fully embodied by Legba, who is, I would argue, the progenitor of the limbo-dancing, blues-singing African Atlantic subject.

It is no coincidence, then, that both Harris and Baker invoke the figure of the "trickster" in their theses, although neither specifically invokes Legba.[12] Wilson Harris does suggest, however, that one aspect of New World limbo reconfiguration, particularly as evident in Haitian Vodoun, is "intent on a curious re-assembly of the [African] god or gods" (162). While it is true that the trickster figure/trope does appear to have assumed a very prominent position in recent literary analyses, Adoleye Ogundipe, in her study of Esu-Elegbara, cautions scholars to complicate their readings of Esu (Legba) with regards to this trope.[13] Ogundipe maintains that gods such as Esu are never merely "trickster" archetypes. In fact, she argues that Esu is not a trickster per se; rather, he is a tempter, engaging in "trickery" to prove "philosophical and aesthetic points" (197). Ogundipe's distinction between trickster and tempter is an important one. The tempter is concerned not with his/her *act* of trickery, or with his/her *hermeneutical prowess*, but rather with the *hermeneutical process*, and, most centrally, *lessons* to be gleaned by the subject from his/her dialectical engagement with the gods who are the repository of knowledge.

For example, in the Yoruban religion *àshe* is a divine gift made accessible by the Supreme Creator Olorun (a deity who is neither male nor female) to the gods and goddesses, who are conduits of its power and who can make its divine essence accessible to men and women. But it is Esu-Elegbara who is gifted with the power to "make all things happen and multiply [àshe]."[14] To achieve àshe one must: "Cultivate the art of *recognizing significant communications*, knowing what is truth and what is falsehood, or else the *lessons of the crossroads*—the point where doors open or close, where people have to make decisions that may forever affect their lives—will be lost" (Thompson 19, emphasis mine). Hence, without Eshu/Legba, the god of the crossroads, pathways to divine purpose and human meaning are resolutely closed.

In West African philosophy, the highest achievement of art is àshe, and when ascribed to a composition or performance, the resultant creation is held to have transcended all prescribed boundaries of form. As a consequence, art that achieves àshe would naturally defy conventional dictates; it would break down familiar/conventional/generic constructs, such as those

governing fact, fiction, truth, reality, myth, history, nation, imagination, and narratology. It would fall "beyond a boundary" of Eurocentric epistemology and aesthetics.[15] The power of àshe, then, lies in its transcendent ability to cross the borders and boundaries of fixed constructs regarding knowledge, interpretation, and apprehension as well as the formal structures framing such hermeneutical engagement. If àshe is, thus, the sign of formal ideology, Esu-Elegbara is the conduit through which communities of participation and critical analysts *apprehend* the ideology of form.

In the poetics I am attempting to lay out here, I would argue that àshe is isomorphic with jazz, that African American invention and innovation characterized by an improvisation that continuously casts the light of newness and originality on that flexible form. Amiri Baraka designates the formal àshe of jazz "the changing same."[16] Art historian Robert Farris Thompson speaks of àshe as a "flash of the spirit," paradoxically ineffable, yet at the same instant *communally identifiable*. Baraka's and Thompson's works are coextensive in their claims that a great communal jazz man or ceremonial performer (like Harris's limbo dancer and Baker's blues singer) never plays the same ol' song. In a similar vein, the case for the jazz novel has long been made. Kamau Brathwaite defines the jazz novel as the antithesis of the epic. Fundamentally and simultaneously improvisatory and contestatory, the jazz aesthetic in the Caribbean novel is, according to Brathwaite, rhythmically and communally identifiable. African Atlantic narratives are unequivocally shaped by philosophical principles such as àshe and formal principles represented in jazz. Their jazz is always detectable in the *forms* of their expressive performance and production. In brief, I set out for my analyses culturally in-formed signifiers like àshe and jazz to theorize the navigations and transgressions of conventional generic and deeply revered Western creative philosophical boundaries in African Atlantic narratives and invoke Legba as the principal sign of participatory, dialectical engagement with African Atlantic narratology.

Like many other West African gods, Eshu/Legba crossed the Atlantic to the New World during the most horrific instant of globalization: the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Eshu/Legba survived more extensively than other deities because he functioned as intermediary between humans and gods. Any communication with the gods had first to engage the circuitry of Eshu/Legba. This orisha/god, then, had to survive. Eshu/Legba's New World manifestations include Exù for Candomblé worshippers in Brazil,

Elegua in Santería, and *Papa Legba* in Haitian Vodoun. While it is true that these gods function in similar ways, they are not exactly interchangeable.

I think it is important to note at this juncture that for purposes of my analytical project I am self-conscious in my subsequent use of Legba (although my invocations bear relevance to Esu/Eshu/Elegua/Exù and all other named crossroad gods). I make this choice not because Legba of the Fon or Papa Legba of Vodoun are more suited in their aspects than is Esu of the Yoruba. I choose Papa Legba in his Vodoun aspect in the first hermeneutical instance because of his black revolutionary Haitian heritage. For it is also my contention that liberation from formal strictures governing official or sanctioned discourses is a fundamental requisite for New World revaluation, a material and discursive break from all forms of Western, philosophically grounded oppression. It is in homage to 1804, to Haiti's revolutionary spirit, its determined resistance to European domination and its peoples' will to imagine and forge an independent black nation, that I invoke Legba in my ensuing analyses.

In chapters that follow, then, I examine narratives whose form, narratology, and epistemology insinuate the crafting hand of Legba, the divine being who "knows that the power of ambiguity and . . . multiplicity of perspective . . . change the fixed into the free" (Davis 8). What I call the *Legba Principle* is my metonym for African Atlantic narratives whose episteme is engaged in freeing praxis at both the level of form and of theme—in other words, texts whose narratologies interrupt, disrupt, and erupt Euro-American literary convention for sociopolitical, ideological purposes. Hence, the narratives chosen for examination all engage one or more key historical moments of black subjugation and resistance to slavery, colonialism, legal segregation, Cold War imperialism, neocolonialism, and the rise of neoliberalism.

Such violating enterprises are always legitimated by hegemonizing discourses, typically marked by ethnocentricity, hierarchized binary configurations, and narrowly defined notions of identity, culture, and progress. As Houston Baker reminds us, "Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional. The 'placeless,' by contrast, are translators of the nontraditional . . . Their appropriate mark is a crossing sign at the junction" (*Blues* 202). One might say, then, that the texts chosen

for examination are in the Bakeresque sense representative of the "placeless." Such placelessness, however, should not be confused with the kind of postmodern indeterminacy that is emptied of social, political, historical, cultural, and economic implications. Resistance to fixity and privileging fluidity are fundamental requisites of imagining freer, more inclusive, and fundamentally just societies. It is in this domain of *freedom* that Legba, the god of the crossing sign, presides.

Great Time

As a case in point of such "freeing praxis" in operation, one might note that African Atlantic narratives are frequently marked by polyvocality. In other words, the traditionally epistemological narrator "shares the stage," so to speak, with other equally reliable, interpretive narrators. This disruption of a convention of single, first-person narration provides a means for African Atlantic writers to insist upon *communal, participatory narrative enactment*, and by extension to imagine a national public sphere in more democratic terms. Since fixity is a function of *Traditional power*, communal recounting as a formal device signals ideological commitment to decentering power—in this case, the power of a single, individualistic voice and perspective. In addition, prose and poetry, history and myth, memory and imagination—concepts that are conventionally posited as binary oppositions in History and Literature—exist in tandem in African Atlantic expressivity. This refusal to order the world (at least in the space of the text) in binary, totalizing, or exotically individualistic terms reveals, of course, a desire for fluid, disruptive, flexible categories of meaning—a semantics vested with liberating political and ideological potential.

Such fissures in History and Literature and their attendant teleological or causal configurations inevitably produce a restructured relationship to temporality. In African Atlantic narratives, textual time frequently occurs cyclically, not linearly. Such narratives self-consciously invoke culturally specific temporal and spatial models that challenge normative narratological structures. Evidence of such temporal shifts is readily apparent in Audre Lorde's *Zami*, aspects of which I discuss in chapter 2, and is even more overt in Lovelace's *Salt*. But for the moment I want to invoke the example

of John Edgar Wideman's *Cattle Killing* (1996). This narrative moves temporally over the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries and geographically across Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and southeast South Africa. Wideman's philosophies regarding the imbrications of time, history, memory, geography, and the imagination, which I examine in greater detail in chapter 5, are emblematic of African Atlantic reconfigurations of Western time. Even more significantly, such cross-temporality counters Historical hegemonizing discourses, engaging instead in self-conscious acts of historical revisionism that are requisite for sociopolitical transformation.

The subsequent excerpt from Wideman's creative nonfiction work *Fatheralong* (1994) illuminates in brief such theoretical paradigm-shifting:

> Sometimes I feel duration is an illusion . . . Everything happens only once, then everything changes. The notion of duration, of continuity, the possibility of making sense, no more or less a fragile survival strategy. A hedge against chaos . . . The idea that time unfolds linearly in seconds, minutes, hours, years, the terms we've constructed to tame it, feels utterly unconvincing . . . Memory then isn't so much archival as it is a seeking of vitality/harmony, an evocation of a truer, more complete, saturated present tense. (186)

Time, thus, is not linear according to Wideman—it is transcendent or, perhaps, "placeless." Wideman's philosophy of time echoes the West African concept of *Great Time*, what African theologian John Mbiti defines as "that ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed in a reality that is neither after, nor before"(22). In *African Religions and Philosophies*, Mbiti argues that "the linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future, is practically foreign to African thinking . . . history moves 'backward' . . . from the moment of intense experience to the period beyond which nothing can go"(17–23). This concept of Great Time metaphorizes the tug of West Africa in very concrete terms. Again, such a tug is not steeped in nostalgia; rather, it is evidenced in and by its efficacious epistemological use in African Atlantic narratives.

West African philosophy has historically (and contemporarily) deconstructed the idea of "progressive," linear causality. According to philosopher Paget Henry: "Spatial and temporal dimensions of [traditional African] spiritual ontologies are cosmogonic. Time is a durational aspect

of the project of the deities . . . The temporality of divine projects does not follow a linear path. Rather, it moves in a cyclical path . . . Like time, the view of space is also cosmogonic . . . Time and space are thus cosmogonic categories that help to frame the project of creation, but do not in any way limit or constrain the creator" (26). Henry's description of African cosmogony, like Mbiti's "ocean of time," is germane to African Atlantic narratological construction. If history, as Mbiti and Henry respectively assert, is "neither after nor before," then the discursive form of the historical reenactment must adhere to such indigenous diasporic governing principles. Narrative representation itself in its attempt to fix time within a traditionally "real" or "imaginary" construct—or what we familiarly call "textual representation"—cannot occur in a linear, teleological, or preordained fashion.

This temporal and spatial precept, Wideman argues in an interview,

> is very logical in African American culture, in which people have very little control over things like progress and economic, material accumulation . . . a concept like Great Time would be crucially important because it provides a mirror, a place where you can see who you are and what you are in your own terms . . . Your great people have to be held in the oral tradition and you have to tell stories about them. You can't locate them in terms of dates but you can create them imaginatively in Great Time. (Lisa Baker 268)

Here Wideman confirms his belief in the transformative power of the imagination. In simpler terms, if you no longer have to rely upon a linear and fixed construction of "the story of your people" but can imaginatively draw upon past, present, future, dead, alive, and yet-to-be born to create that self-same story, what opens up is a radically empowering space in which to define.

Through the invocation of Great Time as a structuring agent for African Atlantic narratives, black subjects are potentially imbued with defining power. Seizing the power to define, under the auspices of the imagination, is most certainly a necessary act of survival. Such investiture in the imagination is a concomitant trope of African Atlantic modernity. Harris, for example, posits the "act of imagination" as the antidote, as it were, to the "apparent void of history which haunts the black man." It is no coincidence

that he further suggests that such a void can *never* be "compensated" until acts of imagination open "gateways," releasing a "free imagination which is at risk on behalf of a truth" (166). It is here that Henry's reminder that "the temporality of divine projects does not follow a linear path" is affirmed. Hence the power of the imagination to operate in Great Time is opened, as it were, by Legba, who stands at the gateway or crossing of such hermeneutical and heuristic engagement.

Quilted Discourse

Revisioning temporality naturally has an ineffable consequence on concepts such as memory, myth, history, truth, fiction, etc. As such, in African Atlantic narratives, narrators, voices, stories, histories, myths, imaginations, and readers are often woven together, ebbing, flowing, spilling out onto each others' textual bodies and into the body of the text. I am purposefully invoking the term "woven" here. For in another culturally informed theoretical model, Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido describe the "quilting structure" of form found in Caribbean women's writing as a necessary reconfiguration of the privileged status accorded to fragmentation within postmodernism.[17] Their affirmation that "the linear phallocentric form of the male text is often rejected by Caribbean women writers" calls to mind the suppressive limbo pole and railway track against which black subjects subversively move (6). Despite the fact that Davies and Fido's framing is yoked specifically to Caribbean women writers, their reconfiguration of "fragment" as "quilt" engenders my subsequent readings for several reasons.

First, the term "fragment" is too frequently, in postcolonial, modernist, and postmodernist studies, metonymic with angst, the kind of anxiety of exile, of the ever-fragmented (read tortured, black, intellectual, modern, fractured) self who exists in a sort of netherworld between identities, between races, between languages, between nations, or at minimum, lives schizophrenically within the nation. While Simon Gikandi makes a compelling case for the uses as well as the limitations of "fragmentation," I would agree with Fredric Jameson, who suggests in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that "*fragmentation* remains too weak and primitive a term, and probably too 'totalizing' as well" (371).[18]

Jameson argues that fragmentation in strictly denotative terms fails to capture the central impetus it attempts to articulate, namely, multiple strategies, new and unexpected modalities, seemingly unrelated events, discursive modes, multiple categorizations, and layers of reality (372). Additionally, Jameson points out that such "semiautonomization of reality is then *prior* to what happens in the psyche" (372, emphasis mine). In other words, he cautions against the suggestion that fragmentation as a marker of the postmodern self produces the fragmented world of that self; rather, he locates such fragmentation, after conceding the term's only approximate efficacy, precisely within the realm of the "social templates that project" such "fractured and multiple subject positions" (372). Thus, the so-called fragmented subject does not produce his/her fragmented world; rather, that world is produced by specificities of history, economics, politics, and the like.

And yet, African Atlantic literature is oft-times framed in terms that figure, center, and reify alienation, dispossession, and fragmentation. We are left too often with a kind of "problematics" of African Atlantic subjectivity. Shakespeare's Caliban, to wit, becomes an abidingly privileged sign of black dispossession under colonialism. As a result, Caliban's dilemma vis-à-vis being stripped of language, cultural, and familial identity (being forced to "curse the master in the master's tongue") is regarded as the quintessential sign in postcolonial discourse yoked paradigmatically to postmodern and poststructuralist imperatives.[19] In a similar vein, W. E. B. Du Bois's "double consciousness" is an enduring sign of an "unequal" clash of subjectivities under the reign of U.S. institutional racism. Du Bois's notion that the "Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world . . . which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (*Souls of Black Folk* 3) is equally abiding.

Hence the literature has been trapped in binary oppositions, or Manichean polarities, which then transmogrify into notions of cultural, linguistic, and racial hierarchies that can never be reconciled by or within the fractured African Atlantic subject. In this context, national identity formation is frequently subordinated to the problematical constitution of individual subject formation. As a consequence, current critical discourse on race and identity tends to emphasize what Paget Henry describes as a hierarchical configuration that prioritizes the "mythopoetic over the politico-

economic." Within such privileging, social transformation is imagined primarily in terms of the "ego/consciousness relationship." In other words, it is the individual African Atlantic subject's movement toward consciousness that is vested with transformational power and "replaces a historicized political economy as the grammar of human self-formation" (Henry 111). Thus, "the secondary status" accorded the politico-economic creates a condition in which "it becomes incorrect to view the current Caribbean [and by implication African Atlantic] crisis in strategic economic and political terms, rather than mythopoetic ones" (Henry 112).

Henry suggests, and I agree, that the mythopoetic and the politico-economic should be dialectically rather than hierarchically positioned, but the latter has been the tendency in terms of the poetics of nation and/or racial identity within the literary imagination. J. Michael Dash confirms this propensity:

> Making the fragments whole is a therapeutic ideal that unites Anglophone Caribbean writers as disparate as Wilson Harris, Kamau Braithwaite and Derek Walcott. Glissant, however, would largely agree with someone like Marianna Torgovnick who in "Gone Primitive" casts scorn on what she fears is the lure of "carnivalesque rejoicing of celebrating the crossing and recrossing of things, of believing that contact and polyphony are inherently liberating." Glissant asks us to look again at the figure of Caliban and restage his barbaric cry not in the organic heartland but at those frontier spaces of economic interpenetration and cultural interaction. ("Madman at the Crossroads" 43)

Dash's theoretical concerns vis-à-vis Glissant and his place within the contemporary critical apparatus rest upon an insistence of the reintroduction of *materiality* in the discursive domains of African Atlantic theory.

Restaging Caliban's "barbaric cry" at the "frontier spaces of economic interpenetration" strategically reconfigures conventional African Atlantic paradigmatic nostalgia for an originary language, culture, and identity, or conversely, facile celebrations of cultural hybridity. Instead, we are fittingly shifted toward analyses of the fiscal consequences of the colonial project and its aftermath. African Atlantic discourse so frequently prioritizes Caliban's loss of language and identity (Torgovnick's notion of the "crossing and recrossing of things") constituted in discourses of core/periphery, one/

other, center/margin, and alterity—but what about Sycorax's land? What about the *economic interpenetration* between Prospero and the former landowner whose land he now inhabits? Davies and Fido's reconfiguration of "fragment" as "quilt," I would argue, metaphorically resolves this ongoing dialectic.

For, such a redefinition fosters the reentry of *materiality*. The reentry of materiality (in my own terms), specifically the financial and economic implications of the colonial project in its various manifestations throughout the African New World, is crucial to theorizing African Atlantic subjectivity. There is, of course, the quilt as literally "material," but it also seems to me that there is the quilt as an architectonically functional object or *objet d'art*. A quilt is always already more than it appears to be. It is this art form's perceived capacity for strategic duality that, in the realm of folklore at least, fostered its use during slavery as a subversive tool to resist white hegemony by embedding the "map to freedom" within its very cloth, fibers, and cross-stitches.

It is critically important to note at this juncture that there have admittedly been numerous challenges launched in terms of the veracity of this so-called Quilt-Code. Claims that encoded messages in quilts were used as a tool during the Underground Railroad, have, in many scholarly quarters, been resolutely debunked. And yet, in the realm of oral history, the idea of such subversive quilting persists. As folklorist and quilt historian Laurel Horton remarks, "It's not a matter of one group having the truth and the other not. It's a matter of two different sets of beliefs. It's made me realize that belief doesn't have a lot to do with factual representation. People feel in their gut that it's true so no one can convince them in their head that it's otherwise" (Stukin 2). As with Horton, I am not, at this point, concerned with the History whose domain is "the head." I leave questions related to the veracity and authenticity of the Quilt-Code to the purview of Underground Railroad and Quilt historians. But, if we dispense with History for the moment, with the disciplinary proscriptions that necessitate a fixed dichotomous relationship between fact (head) and myth (gut), what results is a radically altered epistemological model that makes room for an efficacious and persistent alternative history that is discursively revisionary and engenders an expansive conceptualization of what constitutes Truth. As a result, my subsequent usage of quilting as an appropriate and valuable

metaphor that aptly signifies upon fragmentation is coextensive with the abovementioned epistemological shift.

In truth, one cannot make it safely to freedom without "reading," for the map is hidden in plain view within the quilt.[20] Consequently, what emerges is a synergistic relationship between the quilt-making artist (writer), the art itself (the quilted text) and the meaning gleaned by the witness to the art (the reader) whose liberation relies upon his/her ability to read the very *pathway to freedom*.[21] Such liberation potentially transcends the symbolic realm. The African Atlantic subject can in fact secure tangible, physical, and material freedom once fitted with interpretive "tools" to read oneself into sovereignty. Such is the liberatory impulse of African Atlantic formal poetics.

At the same time, such quilted narratives insist upon functionality grounded within endemically African Atlantic cultural aesthetics. Within black cultural aesthetics, West African concepts such as Great Time, àshe, and African New World orisha/loa philosophy, like the Legba Principle, provide theoretical frames for understanding the cultural markers, logic, and revolutionary potential of narrative structure. It is here that the tools to read the *map hidden in plain view* reside. A deft reader is always culturally savvy. Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard's description of African American quilt-making is discursively instructive in thinking more closely about the quilted structure of African Atlantic texts in terms of analyzing the fabric, so to speak, of the texts themselves. In their chapter titled "The Fabric of Heritage: Africa and African American Quiltmaking," Tobin and Dobard suggest that the quilt, which they describe as a "cultural hybrid," encodes multiple meanings and thus operates as a "fabric griot" (36).

Through quilting together "geometric patterns, abstract improvised designs, strip-piecing, bold, singing colors and distinctive stitches," the quiltmaker functions, like the African griot, as the purveyor of history, the repository of culture, and the mechanism through which the stories of the community are passed down (36). Akin to the shape-shifting orisha Legba, "although the African American quilt appears to be an everyday bedcover, it is more" (Tobin and Dobard 36). In tracing the surviving Africanisms in African American quilts, the authors discuss the use of "abstract arrangement" that sometimes "seemed to glorify confusion." What they claimed to discover, and in turn propose, was the idea that the use of "fragmented patterns and the use of so many different fabric textures" were derived

from the African belief that "evil travels in straight lines" (48–49). As a consequence, quiltmakers would engage in what Robert Farris Thompson calls "randomizing the flow of paths" in order to thwart the movement of evil (qtd. in Tobin and Dobard 49).

The use of abstraction, fragmentation, and improvisation in narrative form emerges from a radically different epistemological base when analyzed through the rubric of the quilt. Thus, the fabric of the so-called fragmented text is, rather, a strategically constructed aesthetic form emerging from a specifically West African tenet, which is literally threatened by linearity, chronology, and teleology. And at the same time, it is precisely the fabric, the network of meanings, associations, juxtapositions, and "randomiz[ed] flow," that guarantees safe passage from enslavement to freedom. The reader engaged in the process of deciphering the story the fabric reveals is indeed engaged in a radically reconstitutive act of liberation: reading to be free, transacting literacy and liberation.

African Atlantic Literacy

In this way, readers become designated agents in the production of meaning both in terms of the body of the text and in terms of engaging the revolutionary praxis attending such pedagogic practice. To decipher meaning, however, necessitates full writerly immersion, in the Barthesian sense, into what I would call a "literacy of African Atlantic resistance."[22] Such proficiency tropes on Vèvè Clark's definition of "diaspora literacy," which she describes as "the ability to read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective" (304). In Clark's formulation, the allusive quality of African diasporic texts is not primarily concerned with veiled references to history, or signposting the past; rather, allusion is "a pedagogical tool," which produces active writerly engagement.

Building upon Clark's formulation, I propose that the pedagogic imperatives replete within African Atlantic narratives simultaneously necessitate and potentially produce "a literacy of African Atlantic resistance" that includes recognizing and recouping the literal (and frequently suppressed) history of black resistance to white hegemony; reader resistance to the linear, cause-and-effect simplifications replete within "official" versions

of African Atlantic history; and self-conscious resistance to the propensity to impose upon the narrative, generic expectations that are valued and normalized within Western epistemological and hermeneutical traditions. The reader who wields such literacy is fitted with the tools to navigate the text's allusive quality. For as Clark reminds us, while "allusion is a silent interlocutor . . . it is also a trickster creating confusion on the one hand and associations on the other" (313). Thus Legba emerges anthropomorphically, in this instance as the sign of discursive writerly engagement.

I foreground in chapters that follow, then, works whose poetics embody chief aspects of the Legba Principle, whether through their invocation of Great Time, the use of a quilted discursive model, or the jazz and/or àshe aesthetic. Each text suggestively engages in generic transgressions that fundamentally challenge conventional Euro-American discursive hegemony. As such, the accounts examined invoke Legba even as they inaugurate imaginative and resistive acts of border crossing. By extension, readers are implicitly charged with entering the gateway of imagination so that they might dialectically engage in a freeing praxis. *In toto*, the narratives are in no way exclusive, but rather emblematic, and, I hope, in some ways helpfully representative.

My choice to examine narratological models employed by both men and women in the United States and in the Anglophone Caribbean is intentional. Scholarship concerning aesthetic production in the African diaspora frequently separates U.S. African American and African Caribbean thematic concerns. Conventionally, too, U.S. African American and African Caribbean interests, when yoked together in literary analysis, occur primarily under the auspices of a feminist scholarship seeking to theorize transnational feminist concerns. My goal here is not to challenge or critique either of the aforementioned scholarly modalities. There is much to be gleaned from imposing geographic/cultural and gender specificity in critical analyses. At the same time, my hope is that through *crossing* such disciplinary conventions in my own work, alternative discursive modalities may become equally efficacious, or at least, prove instructive.[23]

The use of the term "African Atlantic" instead of African diasporic is also intentional, albeit not fully comprehensive. I use "African Atlantic" to specify persons/writers or narratives concerning persons of African descent living on the western side of the Atlantic Ocean (in other words, "New

World" African-descended subjects who crossed the waters during the Middle Passage carrying with them cosmogonic and philosophical tenets regarding aesthetic production).[24] The Atlantic, then, becomes the mode both of transferal and of a new expressive geography, the site of transplantation, transmission, and transmutation. It is not simply language, culture, and identity that are simultaneously retained and reformed but also the ideological and philosophical sign-systems undergirding them.

Scholarly discourses related to African "survivals" have perhaps become passé in our climate of antiessentialist postnationalism. Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) constructs the "Atlantic" as the space across which black transnational identities are effectively formulated and deployed, where black subjects can ostensibly transcend circumscribing structures of national and ethnic belonging.[25] In my emphasis on narratology in the "African Atlantic," I am self-consciously signifying on Gilroy's "black Atlantic" by attempting to bring the very materiality of the Atlantic world back into the equation, inasmuch as I am insisting upon the tug of West African philosophical precepts that help to frame our understanding of African Atlantic modernity and its permutations. Finally, too, there is the black Atlantic world—the *terra firma* where black Atlantics do the business of living. As such, I share fully Shalini Puri's insistence that there is room for "progressive or oppositional nationalism" (27).

Such nationalism manifests differently in U.S. and Anglophone Caribbean racial contexts, and yet the battles against enslavement, institutionalized racism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and neoliberalism, along with attendant struggles for emancipation, enfranchisement, civil rights, and independence as well as movements like Garveyism, Négritude, and Black Power, suggest that blacks in the Caribbean and the United States share a more common and interwoven history than is sometimes acceded to in scholarly quarters. For newly emergent Caribbean nations who have only in the last half of the twentieth century secured, at best, a fragile sovereignty, to cede nation is to prematurely concede freedoms. We cannot forget as well that the freedoms hard fought for and at best tenuously secured during U.S. struggles for civil rights and black empowerment are themselves less than fifty years old. The question then is not whether the idea of the nation remains an efficacious construct; it clearly continues to be, particularly as it pertains to citizenship rights, fairness, inclusion, and

access. The critical issue, it seems to me, concerns the creation of a discursively freeing praxis, whether or not national subjects move inside, beyond, or across its borders.

Interruptions, Disruptions, Eruptions

Part 1 of *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic* examines the discursive "interruptions" made by James Weldon Johnson and Audre Lorde to that most privileged of forms: the Autobiography. The first-person narrative is arguably the earliest privileged mode of black literary production. Although both Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and Lorde's *Zami* are primarily linear in terms of their narratology, they both, to varying degrees of course, "interrupt" conventional first-person narrative form. For Johnson, manipulation of narrative form comes at the expense of generic conformity. His formal innovation allows his text to participate in the U.S. national debate regarding black enfranchisement in the face of a trenchant "Jim Crow" repressive sociopolitical landscape. Audre Lorde implicitly challenges conventional, linear, phallocentric forms of autobiography by subtitling her text "A Biomythography." Additionally, her titular choice, "Zami," an eastern Caribbean name, is a term used pejoratively to describe lesbians. Reading her autobiography, which is primarily set in the United States, over and against the Grenada invasion, I argue that her mythic *citing* and concomitant geopolitical *site-ings* are crucial to her renaming, redefining, and rewriting of self and nation.

Part 2 examines the narratological "disruptions" of Michelle Cliff and Earl Lovelace, both of whom are Anglophone Caribbean writers. Michelle Cliff's novel *No Telephone to Heaven* is primarily set during post-Independence Jamaica, and Earl Lovelace's text *Salt*, though more temporally expansive, is primarily set during post-Independence Trinidad. If Johnson and Lorde interrupt their first-person narratives, Cliff's and Lovelace's narratives are entirely disruptive, signaled by their self-conscious fracturing of linearity and historical chronology. I analyze Michelle Cliff's prose/poetic form employed to interrogate post-Independence Jamaica and the individual citizen's responsibility to participate actively in the nation-building process. Earl Lovelace's novel explores the struggle to define a common national identity and a concomitant inclusive socioeconomic

and political structure in the multiethnic space of Trinidad. Lovelace's decentering of the traditionally privileged epistemological status of the narrating subject and his alternative positing of a shared discourse of narrating subjects become a metonym for the nation-building project.

Part 3 discusses the narratological "eruptions" of John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing,* which sets in tandem cross-temporal polyphonous narratives of black exploitation. Wideman, who is an African American writer, creates a narrative that centers and epistemologically explodes the global dimensions and implications of the Grand Narrative of Progress. Wideman's text formally explodes conventional metahistoriography and weaves together three simultaneous narratives of racialized dis-ease: the yellow fever epidemic in eighteenth-century Philadelphia; the Xhosa cattle killing in South Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century; and the genocide of black male children in 1990s urban America. Narratologically polymorphous, *The Cattle Killing* examines the devastating material consequences of the *Discourse of Race* and the life-enhancing possibilities that inhere in storytelling and the exercise of the writerly imagination.

Moving temporally and spatially, backwards and forwards, from Reconstruction to Globalization, all five chapters, in the end, examine quintessentially writerly texts that necessitate, and, I would argue, in some measure produce a potentially revolutionary literacy of African Atlantic resistance. And yet, it is a well-conceived dictum that African Atlantic expressive artists have always "played" with form: signifying, quilting, ragtime, minstrelsy, jazz, carnival. Transforming sanctioned structures has been both an act of survival and a project in national liberation and formation of new identities. Crossing the waters, Legba, the god of the crossroads, oversees the genre crossings that produce a revolutionary formal poetics. In the end, I hope the readings I offer in the following pages will articulate critically and effectively the relationship between African Atlantic aesthetic production and such life-enhancing social praxis as, say, Affirmative Action, Reparations, and Fair Trade. My *form*, in the vein of my precursors and present-day sharers and sufferers, is per force ideological. *Àshe.*

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The words don't count. The tune is the unity of the thing.
—Zora Neale Hurston

I Race, Citizenship, and Form
James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is a *tricky* African Atlantic text. Literary scholars have frequently queried *The Autobiography*'s historiography, didactic style, external literary influences, use of irony, and particularly Johnson's representation of his first-person narrator. The narrative has been called "disruptive," a "textual changeling," "taxonomically slippery."[1] Such appellatives that gesture toward *The Autobiography*'s generic unpredictability are, to a great extent, attributable to its standing arguably as one of the earliest and most notable fictional texts written by an African American that deliberately masks itself. Initially published anonymously, Johnson's book was not the first fictional autobiography in the African American tradition; his, nevertheless, was the first notable work to gain widespread readership and generate the

kind of readerly anxiety regarding its authorship that his textual strategies anticipated.[2] The narrative's confessional frame is a guise, self-consciously employed by Johnson, to authenticate the main character's story, strategically giving the text the appearance of an autobiography. In keeping with narratological operations of the Legba Principle, the narrative structure simultaneously veils and conceals while unveiling and revealing. Hence readers are tasked with standing at the gateway, as it were, of *The Autobiography*'s hybrid structure, open to apprehending Johnson's acts of genre crossing, so that they might decipher narrative truth.

In the case of Johnson's classic text, such attribution of African Atlantic modes of epistemological contestation may seem surprising. In fact, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is richly adorned with the discursive fabric of Legba's principal feature—navigating the difficult and delicate crossing of discourse, purpose, and understanding. Through its formal play, the narrative escapes easy definitions and categorizations. It is neither autobiography nor fiction; it is neither history nor myth, nor does its narrator speak with or for one voice. The polyvocal rhythms that texture the narratological trajectory of *The Autobiography* indeed affirm the presence of the African Atlantic orisha Legba, whose principles governing form guide us toward a richer understanding of Johnson's intricate narrative design and the writerly process his formal interruptions inaugurate. First, however, it is necessary to identify and historically ground the conventional interruptions, formal departures, and literary upheavals that texture *The Autobiography*, all of which clearly reveal the confluence of social forces, generic expectations, and the author's own racial and national consciousness.

African Atlantic subjects in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century were necessarily innovators—involved in imagining new paradigms for citizenship in a newly emergent America that remained unwilling to grant them tenure. The form that black national identity would take had not been resolved with the Civil War or Reconstruction, nor did the turn of the century portend substantial social change. Hence, when James Weldon Johnson began writing *The Autobiography* in 1905, the atmosphere was one of anxious uncertainty. It is not surprising then that the form of textually representing the complexities of black citizenship within a social space marked by such uncertainty would be consequently unpredictable. It is precisely *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*'s tricky resistance to

formal categorization that accounts for its continuing ironic appeal as well as its relevance to the national discourse surrounding the constitution of African American enfranchisement.

Any discussion of Johnson's formal innovations must begin by foregrounding the fact that Johnson is engaged in representing a fictional antihero, a black man who chooses to pass for white rather than negotiate the hardships of race relations in America.[3] As a consequence, *The Autobiography* thematically departs, quite dramatically, from its autobiographical predecessors, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Johnson's work also deviates from traditional narrative representations of passing such as those found in the late nineteenth-century novels of Frances Harper and Charles Chesnutt. Yet we must not forget that Johnson was a publicly acclaimed race man. The intrigue of his formal variations is that he knowingly wrote such hybrid "anathema" in the highly charged racial climate of a rabidly Jim Crow era.

The narratological trajectory of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, then, as a result of what might be considered the work's "contending forces," operates along several discursive lines, including a "false" fictional representation of the narrator, Johnson's own political reflections and theories, and signifying riffs on conventions from the book's literary ancestors. Themes such as black uplift, racial pride, and social responsibility, borrowed from antedating black autobiographical and fictional works, clash with the ideological position the narrator must espouse in order to justify his own politically charged identity choices.

The work's manifold positions create a writerly tension that is inherent and identifiable in the text, a tension that serves finally to undermine the integrity of the first-person narrative voice. The scholar Valerie Smith describes such fractures in the ex-colored man's autobiographical enterprise as *circumlocutory*, saliently undercutting "the process of self-individuation that characterizes the writing of autobiography" (45). Such "narrative circumlocutions" clearly represent the intriguing formal tension between the narrator's ideological position and the author's creative ability to assume unequivocally a narrative voice and axiology at odds with his own philosophies. At the same time, it is precisely these circumlocutions, internal tensions, and destabilizations, as I shall later demonstrate, that ask us (the readers) to attend to our conventional expectations governing form. Freed

from such circumscribing critical imperatives, *The Autobiography's* aberrations—its narratological interruptions—become reconfigured as new paradigms for theorizing a highly complex New World African Atlantic experience.

At the same time it is unequivocally the case that Johnson's ability to conjure and craft his antiheroic protagonist is thwarted by historical circumstances surrounding his writing and by, of course, his own political sensibilities. The context framing Johnson's act of writing, principally the struggle for black enfranchisement, plainly conflicts with the narrator's portraiture. It is here that materialist immersion meets formal innovation. Although conventions of autobiography, notwithstanding the fictional status of Johnson's text, would seem to predispose themselves to a close subjective connection between the author and his first-person narrator, the narrative occasion of Johnson's endeavor is such that the views upheld by the narrator are often radically divergent from those of his creator. Thus, Johnson is writing out of what Houston A. Baker in *Turning South Again* has termed "a tight place." In other words, Johnson is in some measure constrained by the generic impositions of the autobiographical enterprise he is undertaking and must skillfully maneuver under or around them to advance his ideological positions.

At the center of Baker's theoretical formulations is the notion that the black male subject at the turn of the twentieth century is always already constricted in relation to the dominant white social structure and either affirms, subverts, or at least must navigate through the confining social arrangement marked by institutionalized and informal racism, the dictates of white public "opinions and desires," and the incumbencies of employing strategy and compromise in order to achieve socioeconomic mobility (Baker 69–75). Such skillful maneuvering in the face of limited space within which to assert black subjectivity recalls the strategically metamorphosing subject of Wilson Harris's limbo gateway.

For Johnson, the impinging dictates of a narrowly defined formal enterprise is further circumscribed and framed by the tense racial climate in which he is writing. At the same time, it is equally important to remember that the early twentieth-century textual black subject is also situated within another kind of narrowly defined and limited space in which there tacitly exist agreed-upon rules governing black male subjectivity and its literary representation within the black public sphere.[4] We might say

then that Johnson writes out of (at the very least) a triply determined tight space within which he must deftly navigate the incumbencies of race, citizenship, and form. The aforementioned withstanding, it is curious that Johnson would embark upon the narratological experiment that is *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in such a vexed environment. Why did he engage such risky genre-crossing business at precisely what the black historian Rayford Logan calls the nadir of Jim Crow racism in America?

The Nadir

By the turn of the twentieth century, it was increasingly clear to most African Americans that the Emancipation Proclamation and the attendant Thirteenth (1865), Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments to the Constitution would not, and perhaps could not, fulfill their promises. Concurrent with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 was the creation of the "Black Codes" designed to maintain the preemancipation social and economic orders of the South. The newly emancipated were subjected to laws that limited their mobility, denied them legislative protection and due process, and discouraged self-sufficiency. So grim, in fact, was the racial landscape during the Reconstruction era that despite the banning of the Black Codes (1866), the passage of the aforementioned constitutional amendments and the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1879, 1871, and 1875, and heated political wrangling between the Republican and Democratic parties, in the final analysis it seemed that the white racist hegemonic structure would remain *in situ*.

The period between 1877 and 1921, beginning with the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes through that of Woodrow Wilson, was, as Rayford Logan in *The Betrayal of the Negro* painstakingly documents, characterized by the systematic denial of civil rights to African Americans. Beginning with the Hayes-Tilden Compromise, which essentially signaled the end of Reconstruction and foreclosed any meaningful institutional transformation in the South, Logan points to the ascendancy of Booker T. Washington in 1895 with his "Atlanta Compromise Speech" as having sounded the death knell for black enfranchisement (79). Between the passage of the "separate but equal" law, ratified by the Supreme Court's ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson* just one year after Washington's public declaration of black

accomodationism, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the defeat of the first antilynching bill introduced to Congress (1900) and the Wilmington "race riots" in 1898, the end of the nineteenth century was marked by a gloomy pessimism with regards to race relations.

Consistent acts of resistance to the persistence of institutional and informal black suppression notwithstanding, when James Weldon Johnson began writing *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in 1905, just five years into a century whose beginning was marked by the frequent and systematic "betrayal of the Negro," the hopes, aspirations, and dreams of the post–Civil War African Atlantic subject were like a ship run aground on the ragged cliffs of racism. Unlike the main protagonist of his text, James Weldon Johnson was an activist culture worker on behalf of eradicating racial discrimination. In fact, it was Johnson who would much later coin the term "Red Summer" to refer to the bloody summer in 1919, when race wars led to the wounding, displacement, and murder of hundreds of African Americans. Johnson's involvement with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), antilynching campaign activities, and literary-politico work with stalwarts like Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, and W. E. B. Du Bois clearly contextualizes the writing of *The Autobiography*, imbuing his imaginative act with an inescapable politico-social agenda. Art and literature, it was believed, invariably served a political function in the struggle against racism. W. E. B. Du Bois's rallying cry, "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists," resoundingly captured the tenor of the early generation of black writers whose literary production was inescapably, self-consciously ideological ("Criteria of Negro Art" 100). The debate regarding the ideological implications of what we might today call such circumscribing imperatives would not be challenged until almost fifteen years after *The Autobiography* was first published.[5] Certainly, at the time of its first publication in 1912, authorial anonymity aside, Johnson subscribed wholeheartedly to the philosophy that art and politics were synergistic.

Passing for White; Passing for Man

The impetus fueling Johnson's narrative experiment, then, seems clearer if one summons to view the African American male literary tradition. In

his own autobiography *Along This Way* (1933), Johnson maintains that he expected that the title *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* would immediately reveal the work's ironic inflections and implicit relationship to prevailing discourses on black male subjectivity. He writes: "When I chose the title, it was without the slightest doubt that its meaning would be perfectly clear to anyone" (238). Johnson's ironic designation borders on the satirical. Such titular signification summons to view the intimate connection between Legba's hermeneutical functions and African American vernacular signifying—of which irony and satire are central features.[6] But such discursive subversion marked by satire is meaningless without a clear understanding of the black male literary enterprise upon which satire would, as it were, "signify."

In the early African American novel, the central protagonists usually have to choose between "self-interest and self-sacrifice" in the name of racial uplift.[7] Faced with the aforementioned dilemma, the main protagonist almost always chooses self-sacrifice, symbolically entering the fold of the enlightened black community concerned with uplift. Johnson's narrator, however, chooses self-interest. As such, while other works reveal the hero's growing racial awareness, Johnson's *Autobiography* plots the antihero's movement toward racial disengagement. In brief, Johnson's representation of the first-person narrator invokes the myth of the heroic black male—then inverts it. Within the context of an already established tradition of African American male protest texts, which link the proud display of masculinity with the struggle for racial justice, Johnson's narrator invites criticism as a failed race man and a failed *man*, for he has chosen to "pass"—a choice that symbolizes synonymous rejection of both social equality and masculine pride.

Thus the "tight spaces" from which Johnson crafts his narrative are most certainly *framed* by contemporaneous and competing interpellations of nationhood, and in particular, the newly conferred black male citizenry's negotiation of their place within a postemancipation United States.[8] The principal venue for such ideological perambulations regarding race, gender, and citizenship was to be found in literature. Even before W. E. B. Du Bois theorized the emasculation of black men as an attenuate of slavery (speaking as he did of the "red stain of bastardy which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race") (*Souls* 6) and the twin evils of segregation and poverty, Frederick Douglass

had earlier discursively connected racial oppression, black emasculation, and resistance to the white power structure.[9] Douglass's famous statement, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (294), at once foregrounded both the emasculating character of slavery and the attendant reconstitution of masculinity through direct action. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* later yokes "masculinity" and "racial responsibility," placing these constructs in dialectical relation to material acquisition and rugged individualism.

Du Bois, speaking directly against Booker T. Washingtonian strategies for social change, says: "If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men . . . Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools" (qtd. in Franklin 279). Throughout his brilliant 1903 collection of essays, Du Bois insists upon the importance of attaining unequivocally equal rights as a necessary prerequisite for claiming black "manhood rights." In fact, Du Bois's principal critique of Washington is that his "gospel of Work and Money" coupled with his "counsel of submission . . . overlooked certain elements of true [black] manhood" (32). Such mutuality of race and gender in Du Bois's social gospel is, according to Hazel Carby in *Race Men* (1998), an integral facet of early black male intellectual ideation.[10] Race and gender exist as they always do, as coterminous and social operators. Thus, Du Bois's critique of Washington's passively strategic assimilationism is inextricably linked to a critique of Washington's gendered subjectivity.[11] What, however, are the implications of such impinging race/gender ideological formulations for authors like Johnson navigating their way through the virtually unseasoned terrain of early African Atlantic literary innovation, production, and representation?

In order to fully glean the significance of Johnson's characterological choices, we have to go forward in time, as it were, in order to meaningfully cast a backward eye toward *The Autobiography*. As readers uneasily grapple with Johnson's portrayal of his antiheroic protagonist, it becomes necessary to examine Johnson's own autobiography *Along This Way,* where he vigorously critiques Washington's ideological position advocating gradual integration. Johnson writes:

> Booker T. Washington, in his great Atlanta speech, felt the necessity of declaring, "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers,

> and yet as one hand in all things essential to mutual progress." It was this figure of speech, this stroke of consummate diplomacy, that made the whole of his eloquent plea swallowable for Southern throats . . . Beyond the ineptitude of its implication that separate fingers (though separated only socially) can constitute an efficient hand, is the fact that it raises an illimitable question: of what do "things essential to mutual progress" consist? . . . There ought not to be any intellectual dilemma in this question for a self-respecting Negro. He can, without apology to himself or to anyone else, stand for social equality on any definition of the term not laid down by a madman or an idiot. (311)

Thus, Johnson makes it very clear here where he stands on the issue of compromising full equality for potential gain of material security. It would appear from this statement that his ideological position is more closely aligned with that of his close friend and contemporary W. E. B. Du Bois. And yet it is important to recognize that this statement was published some twenty-one years after Johnson anonymously published *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by which time the great statesman Booker T. Washington was no longer alive.

I mention this temporal/spatial shift principally because, in his fine biography of Johnson, the scholar Eugene Levy notes that Washington and Johnson shared an affable relationship during the period when Johnson wrote *The Autobiography*.[12] At the same time, while it may be true that Johnson recognized Washington's influence and felt compelled to retain his support, such diplomatic and strategic affability is not endorsement. Johnson may have felt it would be career suicide to condemn openly the most powerful black leader in America at the time of *The Autobiography's* publication. Incidentally, even after Johnson took over editorship of *The New York Age* in 1914, he was renowned for his skillful ability to "articulate clearly on a variety of subjects without tying himself to one or another of the factions then contending for power within the black community" (Levy 153).

Such expressive dexterity is patently salient when examining Johnson's narratological interruptions, discursive shifts, and polyphonous narration. Still, it is obvious that Johnson was extremely careful about his *public* pronouncements of political affiliation. But, certainly, the authorial anonymity of *The Autobiography* gave him reign to freer critique of Washington's strategies. Thus Johnson's limiting *form* opens upon his ability to mask,

veil, and encode his ideological positions within its anonymous, autobiographical/fictional narratological frame.

Washington's trademark "race work" was his public and publicized involvement with northern philanthropists. However, by 1927, when *The Autobiography* was republished bearing Johnson's name, Washington had already been dead for twelve years. Despite his affiliation with Washington, there is no evidence to suggest that Johnson ever fully supported Washington's racial accomodationism. In Johnson's text, the ex-colored man's relationship to "his millionaire," the white philanthropist represented in the narrative, unequivocally invokes the problematic and enduring racist ideology of a benign paternalism inherent in Washington's philosophy of racial accommodationism.

Is Johnson's narrative construction in *The Autobiography* perhaps a cautionary tale against subscribing to the Washingtonian "gospel of Work and Money"? It is self-interest and not self-sacrifice for which the antihero ultimately opts. Entering the world of the text inhabited by the narrator and its author requires deeper excavation of the mutuality of race and gender, both of which are central to the text, its milieu, and its discursive taxonomies.

Who Is my Father? Am I a Nigger?

In a pivotal moment of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, after having discovered he is black, the narrator demands of his mother: "Where is my father, Who is he?"(12). His query raises an issue of paternity that speaks directly and profoundly to African Atlantic historical experience in the United States of America (shades again of Du Bois's "red stain of bastardy"). Whether forcibly or voluntarily bound by social proscriptions, neither biological father, slave master or enslaved African, could fulfill a traditionally paternal role in the lives of their progeny.[13] As a consequence, the enslaved child had to look to the mother or to external sources for gender and identity construction. This dynamic explains the emergence and signification of what critic Hortense Spillers terms "the law of the Mother." It is the law of the Mother, Spillers insists, that signifies "only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African American male

not so much from sight as from mimetic view as partner in a prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law" (80).

Johnson's depiction of his narrator's attitudes toward race and gender are revelatory when read in context of Spillers's critical apparatus. It is curious that the narrator's questions regarding paternity are spoken at the precise moment that he queries his racial origins: "Am I a nigger? . . . Well, am I white?" (12). Inherent in the youthful narrator's query regarding race is the knowledge that to be black is to be unmanned, to be a "nigger." It seems relevant that the narrator doesn't ask whether or not he is colored or white; he asks if he is a "nigger" or "white." The significance of this moment is carried further in the mother's response: "No, I am not white, but you—your father is one of the greatest men in the country—the best blood of the South is in you" (12). This charged and ambiguous reply assures that the narrator's confusion surrounding his racial identity is never resolved. His full-fledged emergence as both a gendered and racialized subject is stunted by, as it were, "the law of the Mother."[14]

In extending Spillers's analytic formulation, it seems clear, particularly in terms of early African Atlantic national formations and the attendant discourse of black masculinity, that the law of the Mother is often displaced by the "law of Race" or the public declaration of racial pride. The law of the Mother, as Spillers so convincingly demonstrates, is fraught with intrinsic tension for black men, within both the symbolic and public/institutional orders. Rejecting the law of the Mother and unable to name the Father, the law of Race thus becomes guarantor of racial and masculine identity. Hence, the law of Race becomes a metonym for the Father's name, the Father's law. Du Bois's theoretical construct regarding double consciousness becomes eminently important here, for it speaks to strategies of African Atlantic sociopsychic survival.

First, the dominant racist order depends upon and therefore projects distorted images of black subjectivity. These skewed ethnic notions produce a circumstance in which black subjects have to develop a double consciousness to create an internal, realistic conception of black identity that is fundamentally alternative than that which is publicly held and widely disseminated. According to Du Bois's articulation of double consciousness, to be "black" and a "man" is in the prevailing social order an American oxymoron. Thus, Du Bois maintains, the African American "simply

wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (3).

At the turn of the twentieth century, however, according to prevailing white standards, successful negotiation of masculinity in the United States rested upon material gain, unrestricted access to the public sphere, and unlimited acquisition of goods and land. Recall, this period marks historically the birth of modern consumer capitalism. By contrast, the successful negotiation of *African American masculinity*, by African American standards, was to fight for social equality and racial justice.[15] As a result, there existed two competing and irreconcilable definitions of masculinity but only *one* viable option for African Americans . . . unless, of course, one could "pass." By having his narrator pass, Johnson both "ex-colors" and "ex-mans" his antihero, who chooses material success and assumes an identity to which he can only (like his mother's answer) ambiguously lay claim.[16]

In keeping with his representation of one who would choose self-interest over self-sacrifice, Johnson ascribes conventionally feminine characteristics to the narrator.[17] For instance, the reader is immediately struck by the narrator's flattering self-representations: "My mother dressed me very neatly, and I have developed that pride which well-dressed boys generally have . . . There were a great many ladies coming to our cottage. If I was around they would . . . tell my mother what a pretty boy I was. Some of them would pat me on the head and kiss me" (4). Despite the obvious classist implications of this statement, the term "pretty" captures the reader's imagination. Such feminized attribution stands in direct contrast to the dominant culture's construction of white heteronormative masculinity.[18] Even if one argues that the social construction of black masculinity was differentiated in the early twentieth century in terms of the social, political and economic orders, the ways in which gender identity was constituted in physical and emotional terms diverged little from the conventional paradigm. "Race men" are not "pretty."

And yet, Johnson's ex-colored man is consistently portrayed in the narrative in quintessentially feminized terms. In fact, in the pivotal "mirror" scene, after having been told for the first time that he is "colored," the narrator gazes at his reflection, searching for physical defects, for the veritable *taint* of race; he discovers instead his "beauty:" "the ivory whiteness of . . . skin . . . beauty of . . . mouth . . . liquid darkness of . . . eyes . . .

long, black lashes that fringed and shaded them . . . softness and glossiness of . . . dark hair that fell in waves . . . making [his] forehead appear whiter than it really was" (11).

More significant than this feminized depiction, however, is the fact that instead of discovering racial defects, he falls in love with his own "white" reflection. The mirror becomes a kind of inverse Du Boisian *veil*—a reflection becomes refraction. In other words, the moment that should symbolize his emergence as a "doubly conscious" African American man, a black subject able to distinguish between his internal racial self-conception and the dominant culture's racial distortions, is never actualized. Johnson's decision to craft the narrator's self-depiction utilizing the discourse of "emasculating domesticity" is clearly influenced by the politico-social construction of black masculinity that relies upon publicly agreed upon rules to govern black male representation. Johnson's "pretty" narrator is such a radical departure from both the iconography of white male adolescence and black manhood in general that his portrayal is clearly vested with the kind of ironic and subversive intent attributable to Legba's discursive maneuverings. Our ability to read Johnson's ironic intent is dependent, however, on our ability to read his narrative choices over and against the masculinized discourse of black uplift and its sociopolitical and ideological incumbencies.

Benign Paternalism

Johnson's thematic emasculation of the narrator, however, is most overtly revealed in his brilliantly strategic crafting of the relationship between the narrator and the unnamed patron. Their union begins when the patron summons the ex-colored man to his table, having heard him play the piano at the Club in Harlem. After playing at an affair at the patron's house, the narrator is well paid and is told never to play for anyone else. In other words, the patron alone may dictate the narrator's actions. The ex-colored man later asserts that "occasionally" he was "loaned" out to some of the patron's friends (88). Not only does the term "loan" connote the proprietary nature of their relationship, but even more disturbingly, the narrator never recognizes the irony of being "owned" in the context of a society still reeling from the aftermath of slavery.

In fact, the narrator states that he is "paid . . . so liberally that [he] could forget much" (88). It is at this juncture in the narrative that the reader is told of the dynamics governing his playing for the patron while they are alone:

> He would sometimes sit three or four hours hearing me play, his eyes almost closed as in a moment of ecstasy, or deep reflection; the stopping of the music always aroused him enough to tell me to play this or that; and I soon learned that my task was not considered finished until he said "That will do.". . . At times . . . I believe I sometimes [played] while dozing . . . During such moments this man sitting there so mysteriously silent . . . seemed to be some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant, possessing over me a supernatural power which he used to drive me on mercilessly to exhaustion. (88)[19]

Besides the obvious homoerotic, if not sadomasochistic, suggestions of this passage, the power structure as described is highly problematic. Authority and control are exercised over the protagonist, whose time is paid for by the benefactor and admittedly sold by the narrator. Over the course of the narrative, while they are together in Europe the narrator begins to refer to the benefactor as "my millionaire," a term of endearment that is also ironically and erotically suggestive.

Other critics have argued that this imbalance of power, the commodification of desire, and the exchange of use and fulfillment between the narrator and his benefactor recall the mother's relationship with her wealthy white benefactor/lover; this parallel evidences gender inversion and at the very least strongly gestures toward a queer reading.[20] While undoubtedly these claims are provocative and appear to be substantiated within the text itself, the question that remains is why? Why would Johnson represent his narrator as effeminate, emasculated, or homosexual?[21] What possible motivation would Johnson have to cast his character in this context?

Throughout this section of *The Autobiography*, the narrator admits that his services are paid for; he is clothed, fed, and subjected to the demands of his benefactor. These textual representations stand contrary to the call for self-determinism and "manhood rights" that characterized both the contemporary movement of black uplift and the thematic concerns of the narrative's literary predecessors. Readers would undoubtedly recognize the ex-colored man's attitudes throughout the text as effeminate if not

homoerotic displays. However, even if we read the patron's relationship to the narrator as strictly paternalistic, the reader cannot help but note the implicit critique of such paternalism, which, in return for supplying material support, demands absolute submission. More important, the millionaire's paternalism is masked as egalitarianism, a duality that the narrator is ill-equipped to unmask but one that an astute reader, literate in African Atlantic history, just might.

The parallels between the so-called "benefactor" from the text and the northern philanthropic "benefactors" who contributed to Booker T. Washington's socioeconomic agenda are easily drawn. Johnson, then, prefigures Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) by some forty-one years by proffering a critique of Washington's relationship to white philanthropy. One may recall that during the tenure of *The Autobiography's* first publication, Booker T. Washington was the most powerful black man in America. Washington's ability to utilize the "robber barons" of the Industrial Age, such as Rockefeller, Carnegie, and other white male powerbrokers, was unparalleled. Their capital was used to fund various projects, including endowing black universities, building factories to provide employment, and girding up the financial infrastructure of the black South. As a consequence, we can read this section as an implicit critique of Washington's politics that not only interrogates the motives underlying white philanthropy, but also strongly asserts that there is a high price to pay for receiving such benefaction—a price that according to Du Bois requires "silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run" (Du Bois, *Souls* 37).

If we agree, then, that Johnson's narrator is confronted with two routes—"self-sacrifice" and "self-interest"—because he opts for the latter, the white Father signifies the "self-interested" position. The white Father represents the mythic American dream, the dream akin to the flawed gold piece (a gift from his father) that the narrator wears around his neck: "I have worn that gold piece around my neck the greater part of my life, and still possess it, but more than once I have wished that some other way had been found of attaching it to me besides putting a hole in it" (3). The reality is that the gold piece can never be more than fool's gold, beautiful to look at but ultimately useless.

Thus, the narrator fails, for he has chosen the Father whose law cannot signify. And the law of the Mother is not an option. For we remember

that it is the narrator's own mother who symbolically stunts his emergence as a racialized and gendered subject. While the narrator dreams momentarily about embracing the public/symbolic realm of racial responsibility, he ultimately rejects the law of Race after witnessing the brutal lynching of a black man in the regions of the "desperate class." Literal self-sacrifice, death, is too high a price to pay for the embrace of the racial law. Having decided to pass, the narrator remarks: "I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every opportunity to make a white man's success, and that, if it can be summed up in any one word, means 'money'" (141). The ex-colored man self-consciously, therefore, chooses "sordid money-getting," and hence can never in the racial-gender economies of his era lay claim to true "manhood rights."

Despite the articulation of conflicting desires throughout the pivotal "money-making" passage of Johnson's text, it is clear that the narrator vaguely regrets his choice: "My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am" (154). What is significant here is that the narrator is unable to name what he is. He can claim no unitary identity, even though he erroneously suggests he can when he states: "I am an ordinary white man who has made a little money" (154).[22] The process of self-individuation enacted by his autobiographical revelations is by the end of the narrative undercut—readers are in some measure naturally deflated by the absence of philosophical and ideological integrity that the ex-colored man ultimately displays. Such disappointment is quite naturally tied to our Western programming vis-à-vis the readerly enterprise, which conventionally yokes readers' satisfaction, as it were, to the successful resolution of the heroic quest.

At the same time it is critical to note that authorial anonymity notwithstanding, James Weldon Johnson's own racialized male self is clearly at stake. While the narrator opts for self-interest, Johnson, as I have previously established, is writing out of a communal duty—self-sacrifice. Through writing, he seeks to explicate issues of racial identity and to expose the inequities and injustices rife of American life. His aim as a writer is social transformation. The principal actor, the narrator, the eye through which we witness the unveiling of black life and the representation of black manhood, is by necessity unreliable. And yet it is through the charting of the narrator's story that Johnson's readers are to be "moved" to advocate for African American enfranchisement.

Johnson is faced with a monumental dilemma, one in which form and content stand in dialectical relationship to one another. As a consequence, Johnson is forced to interrupt the narrative, inserting in key places numerous moments of expository didacticism. Such narratological interruptions reveal the discontinuity between the self-absorbed, economically driven, self-interested narrator and the author. At the same time, this apparent dialectic appears as *problematic* only when the text is read through conventional Western formal structures governing Discourse.

Dialectics of Form and Content

The obvious danger in characterizing an "antihero" is that he will be viewed as representative. His misplaced and ill-informed analyses will be read as accurate and authentic. Remember, Johnson's *Autobiography* is the text that promises in its preface to draw aside the "veil" and give readers a bird's-eye view into "conditions as they actually exist" (xxxiii). Early African American novelists like Johnson were, as William Andrews points out, "burdened by a sense of obligation to speak for black America" ("Introduction" xviii). Hence, the only means by which Johnson can inject social commentary into a text that thematically breaks with black male discursive practice is by appropriating various "voices" in expository, frequently lackluster moments of critical commentary about African American culture and American race relations. Such discursive intrusions or narratological interruptions reflect what I shall call the insertion of Johnson's own "social authorial voice."

The tension between Johnson's fictional representation and his own historical circumstance accounts for an African American literary scholarly tradition that takes issue with the absence of unity both in the narrator's characterization and in the structure of the *Autobiography* itself. Critic Bernard Bell points to an "ironic distance between implied author and narrator-hero," which he maintains "is neither intellectual nor social; it is moral" (89). In a similar vein, Werner Sollors identifies "the intrusion of another, ironic voice, which subverts [the] basic communicative pattern . . . of the first person confessional" (171). Such frequently remarked-upon "authorial intrusions" mark Johnson's attempt to fulfill what he views as his mandate—to utilize literary representation to advance the cause of

racial justice and social equality. Johnson is obligated to include in his narrative insightful and relevant information concerning social, political, and historical factors that help to *frame* African American subjectivity and its literary representation. The result is a black formal cornucopia—self-writing, confession, fiction, and social polemic commingle in hauntingly captivating ways. They constitute a kind of "informal unity" precisely mirroring the actual phantasmagoria of race in the United States.

There are at least four moments when authorial interruptions of the first-person confessional occur and an "intrusive" authorial posture is clearly discernible. The first occurs in that dazzling moment of racial self-awareness in which the narrator reflects upon the change his newfound racial status has brought to his life. Here we recognize two distinct voices inhabiting the narrative. The ex-colored man reflects: "And this is the dwarfing, warping, distorting influence of every colored man in the United States. He is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the viewpoint of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the viewpoint of a colored man" (14). Robert Stepto cogently reads this moment as evidence of the ex-colored man's characterological failings in which he "radically reduces" the Du Boisian concept of "twoness . . . to a nearly grotesque oneness: the viewpoint of a *colored* man"(113).

Yet, it is Johnson's qualifying social authorial voice that clearly dominates the subsequent paragraph and interrupts, if you will, his attempts at maintaining characterological integrity:

> And it is this, too, which makes the colored people of this country such a mystery to whites. It is a difficult thing for a white man to learn what a colored man really thinks; and his thoughts are often influenced by considerations so delicate and subtle that it would be impossible for him to confess or explain them to one of the opposite race. This gives to every colored man, in proportion to his intellectuality, a sort of dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race. I have often watched with interest and sometimes amazement even ignorant colored men under cover of broad grins and minstrel antics maintain this dualism in the presence of white men. (14)

Certainly the astute observation of this subsequent paragraph could be seen as a narratological strategy designed to bolster the preface's claim that this narrative will rend the veil aside. But the reference to the "dual

personality" of the "colored man" is indisputably and ideologically reflective of Du Bois's theory of double consciousness. Further, the notion that there are inexpressible aspects of African American identity distinct from white American identity invokes the very sense of fragmentation implicit in Du Bois's fabled "unreconcilable strivings" of African America. Finally, the narrator's recognition of minstrels' "wearing the mask," in other words, *black folks' signifying*, positions the narrator decisively within the veil as an observer who, at the very least, is an astute cultural sharer—a characterization that seems antithetical to Johnson's literary critical depiction of the main protagonist.

The tension between Johnson's characterization (literally, his novelistic creation of "character") and his desire to utilize his textual prerogatives as a vehicle for raising social awareness creates the proverbial double-edged sword. If he does not include *responsible* social criticism, he runs the ironic risk of his antihero spreading propaganda that will readily be imbibed by unsympathetic white readers. Yet if he has his narrator speak perceptively about racial social issues, he robs his effort of precisely the ironic phantasmagoria of genre that makes it narratively intriguing and socially relevant. So, in the second narratologically interruptive instance that I want to discuss, Johnson resorts to a further novelistic strategy. He appropriates another character's voice to extend his own ideological position.

After the narrator decides to return to America from Europe in order to contribute to "the race" through his musical talents, his patron, "his millionaire," tries to convince him that such idealism is futile because of the vexed racial landscape to which he will return: "This idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment . . . I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured, and refined colored man in the United States" (106). Here the patron suggests that race is merely a construct; that is, that racial identity can be made, acted out, and performed—a performance not unlike the narrator's virtuoso piano performances for his audiences of particularly white onlookers. This perspective on race reifies the patron's endorsement of consumer capitalism. Why, his patron admonishes, should he relinquish monied performance in favor of the arcane black folk province of "race"? His patron's perspective is not surprising given his capitalistic stance.

However, the patron subsequently delivers an impassioned speech on the ignobility of human nature and the dispossession of blacks caused by

the institution of slavery. His speech is a clear thematic departure, particularly because up until this point in the narrative, the reader has not heard him comment on racial politics at all. In fact, he speaks very little. Yet at the critical juncture in question he is grandiloquent, speaking as he does of "the degradation of the blacks through peonage, unjust laws, unfair and cruel treatment . . . the degradation of the whites by resorting to these practices, the paralyzation of the public conscience . . . the ever overhanging dread of what the future might bring" (106). Such fervent discussion of the evils wrought by enslavement and racism provides a means by which Johnson's text may write itself into the African American male public discourse governing race, citizenship, and enfranchisement.

The patron's reference to the "paralyzation of the public conscience" proffers profound social commentary and characterizes him as quite a learned and skilled rhetorician; the reader wonders why we have not heard him speak—and certainly speak so urgently before. The discussion between the narrator and "his millionaire" marks a narrative instance in which Johnson attempts to negotiate the dichotomy between representing a character who cannot legitimately (in terms of character integrity) claim such critically conscious views and the necessity of vehemently denouncing the current American social arrangement. Hence, intratextual and intertextual demands clash, conspiring to destabilize narrative unity. The patron, in effect, becomes not only a "second" character but also falls "out of character" and speaks ironically on behalf of "the race." Johnson's self-conscious break with form, in this instance, is necessarily ideological.

In the section depicting the narrator's travels in the segregated railway car designated for white passengers only, the narrator, of course, chooses to pass. During the journey into the Black Belt, he witnesses a discussion about the race question between a white southern planter, a white northerner, who is a former Union soldier, and a Jewish man. Of the three, the northern white man makes the most telling statements. After having asserted that the Civil War was fought to preserve the Union, a response that seems conventionally "northern," the soldier launches into an extended discussion about the artistic, scientific, and philosophical contributions that peoples of African descent have made to the development of civilization. He even ends by asking: "If the Anglo-Saxon is the source of everything good . . . why wasn't the German forest the birthplace of civilization, rather than the valley of the Nile?" (119). The soldier seems

remarkably learned (and characterologically equivalent to the patron) as he offers profound witness. Johnson's appropriation of the northern soldier's voice provides a means of satisfying his self-conscious desire to speak on behalf of the race. The soldier's treatise on the origins of civilization, religion, science, and art is clearly reflective of Johnson's ideological purview. Unable to locate such knowledge in his main character's mouth, Johnson invents a persona within the ritual vehicle that is the railway car to refute unequivocally the prevailing discourse framing black subjectivity and its ascribed racial inferiority.

The propensity of *The Autobiography* to proselytize is persistent, relentless, and subtly brilliant as strategy. One of the most frequently remarked-upon sections in *The Autobiography* occurs when the narrator is rendering his analysis of African American class stratification in Jacksonville, Florida. He divides blacks into three social groups: the "desperate class," "the servant class," and the "the independent merchant class." In keeping with the ex-colored man's claims to aristocracy and disdain for poverty, he characterizes the "desperate class" as morally suspect and potentially dangerous (56).[23] But in swift succession a detached authorial voice hastily enlarges the characterization: "And it is not a hopeless class; for these men are . . . as so much so as the slum and criminal elements of all . . . great cities . . . creatures of condition" (56). Anticipating the potentially negative repercussions of the narrator's pejorative portrait of the "desperate class," the narrative flow is necessarily interrupted in order to define "the black poor's" condition as a function of environment and not biology.

However, it is the narrator's description of the "independent merchant class" that is most striking, for it is largely in keeping with Johnson's own oftentimes elitist views. The narrator characterizes this third group as socially, culturally, and financially on par with but physically separate from whites: "Well-disposed towards the whites . . . they . . . feel keenly any . . . gross discrimination, and generally show their resentment . . . they object to the humiliation of being forced to ride in a *particular* car . . . odd as it may sound, refined colored people get no more pleasure out of riding with offensive Negroes than anybody else would get" (57–59). Levy, the Johnson biographer earlier referenced, maintains that Johnson's impetus in writing *The Autobiography* was in part to demonstrate that white and black people of "equal" station "shared the same social and cultural standards" (135). Johnson believed there could be civil interracial relations, but only if blacks

were treated with dignity and respect, particularly if they were blacks of the educated class (135). Although there is less incongruity and consequently less intratextual friction between Johnson's views and those of the narrator represented here, once again Johnson's social authorial voice must advocate on behalf of his constituency.

In all four narratological interruptions I have described, Johnson privileges moral integrity at the expense of structural integrity. The dialectical pull between form and content engendered by Johnson's keen recognition of the stakes involved in black male public discursive practice is, to my mind, one of the text's most radical characteristics. In this instance then, the text overtly reveals its polyvocality and signals unequivocally the Legba Principle of plurality operating as a main discursive feature.

To Tell a Free Story

Scholarly expectations imposed upon Johnson's narrative have conventionally implied that the text should maintain structural and thematic coherence and unity of a prescribed order. For instance, in his critique of *The Autobiography*, Bell refers to the "weakened integrity of the narrator and the novel's structure" (89). Such discomfiture from a critic as astute as Bell warrants further exploration. For surely it is a structural product of the tension between the intrinsic, formalistic, and narratological expectations imposed upon the genre of black male autobiography and the extrinsic, ideological, political expectations that frame the black male autobiographical enterprise.[24]

Johnson's departure from such narratological convention occurs precisely because of the authorial race man's group- and self-imposed mandate to raise, interrogate, and negotiate issues governing race relations and black culture. Elitist though his perspective may have been, Johnson was analytically at home with black majority concerns. His ability to sustain his depiction of the antihero engaged in the act of confession is clearly filtered, as he himself might have put it, through the alembic genius of his larger responsibility to situate his writing within the larger black male discursive (and arguably liberatory) project.

In fact, during the extensive description of the Big Meeting revival, the narrative voice self-reflexively confesses that the information he reveals is

perhaps "better suited to a book on social phenomena than to a narrative on my life" (109). With regards to the existence of such cross-disciplinary elements, Nigel Thomas critiques Johnson's diffusive narrative structure by maintaining that the aesthetic value of the text is undermined by the inclusion of "intrusively didactic speeches and gratuitous remarks on black culture . . . in terms of theories determined beforehand . . . So expository are these passages that many of them are repeated *verbatim* or in only slightly altered phrasing in the preface to *God's Trombones* and in Johnson's own *Along This Way*" (113–14). Thomas continues by suggesting that it is only the first paragraph in this section on the Big Meeting that conforms to the "acceptable" requisites for "fiction"; the rest, he argues, is "essayistic writing" and as such "should be implicit in the interaction of the characters" and not presented in expository form. Thomas concludes his criticism of the structural inefficiencies of *The Autobiography* by claiming that Johnson's choice of "reportage by way of fictive autobiography to convey the events of the novel" severely mutes the narrative's drama (114–16).

By way of response to such critical discomfort with Johnson's acts of genre crossing—autobiography, fiction, and essay—it is crucial that we recognize that Johnson's text includes analyses of the Big Meeting revival and the inspirational Singing Johnson, mainly because these reflect Johnson's own heartfelt allegiances. Johnson was renowned for maintaining the view that black expressive culture should be recognized as originally American. Central to his literary project in writing *The Autobiography* was the creation of a public discourse that unequivocally demonstrated and affirmed the unique contributions of African Americans to American culture. Therefore, the narrator in *The Autobiography*, in yet another didactic and expository moment, suggests that the cakewalk, ragtime music, Uncle Remus stories, and Jubilee songs stand as refutations of black inferiority (63). The section on the Big Meeting is a continuation of the project of explicating the oratorical, rhetorical, and spiritual expressive culture within African American religious ritual. It is a project to which Johnson admittedly returns in *The Book of Negro American Spirituals* (1925) and *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1926). Johnson's obvious authorial intrusions are in fact based upon predetermined theories about black vernacular and expressive culture as a vehicle for black uplift. Here again the existence of the competing discourses—that of the narrator's autobiographical journey toward self-actualization (inverted though it may be) and the infusion of

Johnson's sociopolitical agenda situated within the black male discursive project—disrupts a traditionally expected narrative unity.

At the same time, although *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is fictional in content—and hence might be called a *novel* and thus expected to conform to the particular standards of "Fiction"—it is critical to recognize that the narrative purposely appropriates the autobiographical form. As such, the detached observational mode that discomfits critics (endemic of Johnson's antedating literary productions and influences) must be read as narrative strategy. At the same time, such departures from generic convention must also be seen as providing a framework where Johnson diffuses, historicizes, and problematizes the volatile racial subject matter taken up by the text.[25] In other words, what makes *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* subject to adverse generic criticism are the very aspects of the work that make it successful in its fulfillment of racial mission and in the valorization of black male subjectivity. Thus, because Johnson chose fictive autobiography to dramatize the psychological journey of an ex-colored–ex-man *reportage* serves as the *ritual vehicle* through which he is able to infuse the truths of his historical moment into the text, even at the expense of generically mandated Truths.

Along "His" Way

It could be plausibly argued that the authorial anonymity of Johnson's classic work challenges my attribution of "noble intentions" to the author. However, I think that as critics we can agree that in 1912 any politically savvy African Atlantic subject who chose to take up the pen recognized the risks and rewards of engaging in the act of representing black subjects for public consumption. After all, the enduring legacies of racist misrepresentation, stereotyping, and dehumanization of African Americans in print, media, folklore, and on the stage were firmly entrenched and everywhere in performance. One only has to watch Marlon Riggs's brilliant documentary *Ethnic Notions* (1986) to fully grasp the deeply disturbing mass distribution of what Professor Sterling Brown has identified as the seven dominant stereotypes of blacks: the Contented Slave, the Wretched Freedman, the Comic Negro, the Brute Negro, the Tragic Mulatto, the Local Color Negro, and the Exotic Primitive (Logan 162). Add to these the mass

consumption of products bearing images of the Mammy, Pickaninny, and Uncle Tom stereotypes. From food to newspapers, magazines, and comic strips, distorted, dehumanizing, and demoralizing images of black people inundated the American public's consciousness at the turn of the century. As a consequence, every black image disseminated for public consumption by African Atlantic subjects bore an incredible burden. Johnson knew this. It is only by reading *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* against the incumbencies of the black male discursive project that any ascribed aberrations become properly contextualized and understood.

Such dialectical figurations of form, content, and praxis are illuminatingly configured in William Andrews's work on black autobiography, in particular in terms of Andrews's use of Bakhtinian theory regarding the intersectionality of aesthetics, ethics, and polyphony. The consequences of genre crossing, as Andrews astutely observes in his subsequent description, is unquestionably germane to our framing of Johnson's literary endeavor: "When genres undergo novelization: they become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and 'novelistic' layers of literary language . . . The novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contract with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality" (Andrews, *To Tell* 272). It is precisely with this notion of indeterminacy and openendedness that we critics often seem most uncomfortable. It disconcerts us. It is indeterminacy, however emblematically codified by freed and flexible genres, that Andrews terms "the price of the renewal" (272).

The dichotomy between self-interest and self-sacrifice, between the individual and the collective, between the self and the society is, of course, from Socrates to Fanon an age-old ethical and philosophical ground for meditation and query. That Johnson and other leading figures engaged in imagining a new national identity for black people in early twentieth-century America would intellectually engage the fluid, complex, and indeterminate parameters governing how best to secure citizenship rights in a land that denied black agency is not surprising. For, in the end, although the ex-colored man chooses the white Father's law, Johnson the author—the crafting hand bent on "renewal"—chooses the law of Race. In so doing Johnson legitimately laid claim to manhood rights championed by the great race men of his culture. The price of renewal, then, a renewal attuned to the weight of black subjectivity and its representation, begins

and ends with the freedom and flexibility that seem aberrations only to those who have not realized that the only truly engendering and fruitful craftsmanship "along" the black way chosen by Johnson is that of a non-risk aversive "semantic open-endedness"—the innovations of, as it were, a broken form.

The Legba Principle

Thus "broken form" is, in the end, engaged in liberating the discursive principle from the discourse itself. It is this discursive clash, signaled by its self-conscious interruptions of form, that ultimately delivers *The Autobiography*'s radical social agenda. Tropes such as a perceived "playfulness" between narrator and author coupled with *The Autobiography*'s themes of passing and parody, embody, as one critic of the narrative points out, a "subversive threat," whose power obtains from "the very difficulty in identifying them" (Goellnicht 27). In other words, now you see it, now you don't. Echoes of the Legba Principle resound in the recognition that semantic open-endedness and indeterminacy are always mutually entwined with potentially life-enhancing lessons of the crossroads.

The astute reader must actively engage in the interpretive process that the narrative's genre-crossing play engenders. In fact, another critical perspective suggests that Johnson is perhaps unconsciously evoking Legba in his characterological depictions of the ex-colored man. Thus, John Sheehy actually reads Johnson's narrator as an evocation of "Esu [Legba], the androgynous inhabitant of the crossroads, the master of language and signification, the (semantic) liar who speaks only (rhetorical) truth" (408). While it is undoubtedly the case that Legba is unconsciously evoked in, or perhaps more precisely invoked by, the narrative, to read the ex-colored man as a Legba figure is to attribute him with a mastery of discourse that his textual representation and Johnson's narrative design simply do not substantiate. However, I think we can all agree that the Legba Principle is operating at the level of form.

For it is the *form* of *The Autobiography* that breaks codes, that affirms its liberatory potential through its transgressive narratology. It is not so much that the narrator is a shape-shifter; rather, the narrative form itself shifts shape. Legba's potency lies in his "ability to maintain a balance of crossed

or contrary forms and forces" (Davis 7). The hybrid form of *The Autobiography* gestures toward such radical crossings. It is precisely the crossing of form, the crossing of generic expectations, the fissuring of Literature with the literarily and culturally specific constructions of race, black subjectivity, black masculinity, racism, and enfranchisement, that represent *The Autobiography*'s outstanding features.

In keeping with the critical push toward unearthing language to describe the text's "tricky" positionality, Sheehy continues by describing *The Autobiography* as "a textual changeling . . . taxonomically slippery, encoding into its very pages the sort of disarray and ambivalence which passing evokes" (403). Both Sheehy and critic Donald Goellnicht attribute the narrative's unique taxonomy to its chosen trope: passing. It is true that as a trope passing necessarily destabilizes fixed racial constructs. However, passing is also intrinsically bound up in the binary oppositional terms of black and white. Hence, passing remains too trapped, too fixed within the dominant culture's discursively circumscribed racial paradigms to achieve even a symbolic liberatory potential. Moving from black-to-white or white-to-black in terms of one's subject position, even if both racial codes are admittedly socially constructed, seems too constricting a paradigm in the face of Legba's multidimensional possibilities. Passing is not crossing. Crossing is not passing.

What the Legba Principle makes possible, however, is the recognition of a kind of metapolymorphous reality in which the crossing of "form and force" is a central precept of human experience. And it is precisely this precept that presents us (the readers) with an alternative epistemology through which to reevaluate, or rather revalue, the phantasmagoria that is *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. In the midst of the chaos that was the African Atlantic experience in the United States at the turn of the century, Johnson crafts a chaotic text—chaotic in the sense that we try to name it, define it, and circumscribe it, but it eludes us. But, as Davis reminds us, "it is only in risking such chaos that novelty is continually reborn, and the community is imagined to interact dynamically, rather than by some rigid structure. The potential for dynamic chaos is the metaphysical heart of the Trickster [Legba] . . . New connections always create a new world" (7–8).

Who best to help navigate the *tight place* of Johnson's discursive landscape than Legba, the divine orisha/loa who transforms "broken form" into

liberatory poetics. The polyvocal nature of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is endemic to the kinds of multivoiced narration that have helped African Atlantic subjects frame the complexities of their "dynamically chaotic" experiences. No one voice, one perspective, one form, one climatic moment dominates. African Atlantic subjects know too viscerally the consequences of uniformed, homogenous, monochromatic Discourse.

As such, James Weldon Johnson's text unequivocally is one of the earliest examples of an African Atlantic subject's self-conscious engagement in the kind of revolutionary transgression of generic boundaries that are the hallmark of African philosophical principles that influence black narratology. I am in no way suggesting that Johnson wrote with self-conscious recognition that his "breaks in form" were in keeping with a culturally in-formed discursive imaginary. In the end, though, what I am suggesting is that Johnson's germinal text does urge us toward opening up the borders and boundaries of current critical analysis vis-à-vis the generic codes that govern the interpretive act. His form is ideological. It is ideological precisely because the social, economic, and political context framing his writing demanded that he break with convention to add his "voice" to the chorus of African Atlantic subjects challenging the structural impediments that refused black people the rights accorded every citizen in the United States.

Mythopoesis

In the subsequent chapter on Audre Lorde, I turn to another (more recent) African Atlantic writer who challenges conventional autobiographical form through narratological innovative and interruption of her own life's story. Black autobiography in the age of postmodernism, however, presents several additional complexities regarding the dialectical relationship between content and form than I have heretofore lain out. For one, a central premise of Euro-American postmodernism is that there is no pure recoverable past. Thus autobiography is often seen as falling outside of both fiction and history.[26] Hence, the genre finds itself self-reflexively straddling critical parameters of real and imagined, objective and subjective, constrained and artistic. At the same time, for the writer and critic of African Atlantic autobiography, the idea of autobiography falling "outside

history" poses specific problems. Because of the relationship between African Atlantic literary production and social protest, the necessity of historically grounding experiences narrated in black autobiographies has been of paramount importance. As I have attempted to demonstrate in terms of Johnson's ideologically based narratological interruptions, representing *the real* in aesthetically and polemically compelling ways has not been a constraint but a vital necessity of African Atlantic survival.

African Atlantic literary production has, whether desired or not, been forced to serve a dual function: it has been engaged in its own aesthetic development, and it has served a decisive political function.[27] Notably, Audre Lorde affirms this point in an interview in which she asserts that "the question of social protest and art is inescapable for me. I can't say it is an either-or proposition. Art for art's sake really doesn't exist for me" (Tate 108). Writing African Atlantic experience has served as a critical medium in the struggles against racism, colonialism, and systemic disenfranchisement. We have realized this in the analysis of the epistemological conundrum facing James Weldon Johnson discussed here.

Consequently, the claim of *authentic* representation inherent in experiences recounted in African Atlantic works has been a historically and politically overdetermined act. *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* is a persuasive case in point. At the same time, as a result of their *ideological* function, black texts of self-writing have often been read as simply mimetic representations of a traditional impulse to narrate the self. In this charge, they are held to lack imagination or (given their historical and polemical cast) to be merely *sociological*. Concomitant with mapping the call for fundamental and systemic social transformation onto the literary enterprise, black autobiographies have also assumed singular status as a function of the racist climate framing their emergence. Thus from the outset of their labors, black autobiographers have contended with unusual scrutiny and sometimes derisive skepticism regarding their acts of self-representation. The author/narrator makes the communal book, which in turn validates individual selfhood. Formal and final causes are coterminous in the process. From its earliest stages, therefore, the black autobiographical enterprise occupied highly contested, ideologically charged, and formally circumscribed space.

What then to do with the ambiguous generic status of *Zami*, which, by Lorde's own admission, "has the elements of biography and the history of

myth" (Tate 115)? How do we balance *Zami*'s interstitial position between elemental history and historical myth in light of what has already been discussed as the traditionally grounded and externally imposed expectations of authenticity and sociopolitical efficacy in African Atlantic expressive cultural canons? In brief, what viable role can *myth* play in the effective engendering of tangible social transformation?[28] At the same time, what, we may ask, happens to the *materiality* of black dispossession in this context? Is it enough to fight at the frontlines for social justice by creating alternative and resistant discourses? By way of response to such queries, it is necessary first to explore the epistemological, ideological, and cultural assumptions that underlie Audre Lorde's conceptions of "biomythography" and the functionality of myth.

> Autobiographical writing surrounds us, but the more it surrounds us, the more it defies generic stabilization, the more its laws are broken, the more it drifts towards other practices . . . While popular practitioners carry on the old autobiographical tradition, other practitioners play with forms that challenge us to recognize their experiments in subjectivity and account for their exclusion from "high literature."
> —Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing the Subject*

> I came to Grenada my second time six weeks after the invasion, wanting to know if she was still alive . . . I also came for reassurance, to see if Grenada had survived the onslaught of the most powerful nation on earth . . . Grenada is bruised but very much alive.
> —Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (1984)

2 The Poetics of Biomythography
The Work of Audre Lorde

In *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Audre Lorde's self-authorizing acts purposely and self-consciously signify on Western paradigms governing autobiographical production and the process of narrating self-individuation. On first encounter, *Zami* seems to be Lorde's autobiography: it appears to be a conventional story of the author's life. We meet a black child living in America, born of Grenadian parents, and grappling with issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class as these frame the narrator's progress toward self-awareness and self-actualization. And yet, Audre Lorde's subtitle, "a biomythography," forces us to conceive her project in other than traditional autobiographical frames. We are asked to recognize her intended and purposeful resistance to Western discursive hegemony. Her narratology drifts "towards other practices," clearly defiant of "generic stabilization" (Smith and Watson xviii). *Zami* is not the individualized story of a black woman seeking self-actualization; rather,

Lorde's now classic narrative is engendered by the collective consciousness of an African Caribbean cosmology. The guiding hand of Legba is at work everywhere in *Zami*, moving us analytically and discerningly through communal myths, histories, and memories that frame the trajectory of Lorde's discursive journey into a communally representative voice.

In the preface to her "autobiography" *Zami*, Lorde describes her work as born from a fusion of "dreams/myths/histories that give the book shape"[1] To the authorial signatory, she assigns the following: "A Biomythography by Audre Lorde." The term biomythography unequivocally signifies on the Autobiographical form. If autobiography is traditionally believed to refer to accurate, chronological, and stable representation of the events of one's life (even if only illusorily so), then for Lorde "biomythography" refers to the self-conscious act of destabilizing such conventional dictates. Deliberately engaged in an African Atlantic–inflected act of revisionism, biomythography simultaneously invokes, interrogates, and celebrates the mythic (and/or imaginative) possibilities encoded within acts of representation, providing always a polysemous cast to the "historicity" of events being represented. Myth, dream, and history assume equal footing as efficient causality and equivalent epistemological value.

In this way, traditional, generic, linear autobiographical continuity gives way to recognizable collage, both in the layering of the dreams/myths/histories to which Lorde refers and in the polyvocality of the narrative. Writing biomythographically signals the notion of autobiography as an amalgam of history, historiography, self-reflexivity, and creativity. Such amalgamation is not posited in postmodernist terms as a problematic but rather is considered a culturally inflected feature of a complex, specific, historical, and material set of realities. The amalgam is, in short, assumed as a *sui generis* space of literary possibility. Hers is ultimately cognizant form shaped by the relationships among reality, myth, memory, dream, history, and imagination deriving from African Atlantic energies of creation and survival.

By naming her work a *biomythography*, Lorde implicitly invokes and subverts conventional Western formal and philosophical tenets. Resting uneasily within the precisely coded ranks of literary genres and forms, Lorde's narrative thus thwarts traditional critical approaches to textual analysis, many of which are grounded in Western paradigms governing self-individuation, teleology, and the creation of the self-sustaining, unified subject. A fundamental precept of offering radically revisionary epistemo-

logical formations that would attribute equivalent efficaciousness to myth, dream, and history is recuperation from alterity—or what might be called colonial and racist derogation and "othering," the significance of mythic thought. In making the case against the ways in which Western philosophy tends to "caricature" the idea of myth, Paget Henry saliently argues that mythic thought primarily functions like modern Psychoanalysis. Both bodies of knowledge, Henry asserts, function to "discursively intervene" in the realm of subject formation, providing a venue "where human agency confronts the conditions of its possibility and impossibility" (184–85).

From a traditional West African and New World African religious/philosophical view, however, knowledge of the conditions of possibility and impossibility is accessed via deities (like Legba) who demand suspension of the "self-determining" ego to achieve a viable exercise of human agency (Henry 185–86). In other words, one's preconceived attitudes, beliefs, desires, predetermined values, knowledge, and expectations have to be set aside in order for the process of divination to work. The wisdom-seeking subject standing at the divine crossroads of knowledge cannot come to such a gateway *always already* knowing what outcome he/she desires or anticipates. As a consequence, Western epistemological assumptions, which underlie the production and reproduction of a recoverable subjectivity (at least in print), just do not work. Myths, memories, dreams, and the imagination—all of which are the province of the mythic or spiritual world—are vital for the creation of a harmonious balance between self and society.

The individualizing ego and an entirely self-regarding egotism unequivocally hold no place in such a balanced equation. Such a revisionist phenomenological worldview clearly moves us beyond fixed taxonomies of Discourse, including interpretation of the efficacy of concepts like myth and history. The West African philosophical prospect I invoke concedes that shifting discursive modalities are always embedded within autobiographical form, precisely because the concept of *the self* is necessarily fluid and flexible.

Outlaw Genre

In like manner, the fluid and flexible generic quality of Lorde's text is aptly codified by Caren Kaplan's characterization of biomythography as an

"outlaw genre" that "requires a recognition of layers of meanings, layers of histories, layers of readings and rereadings through webs of power charged codes" (130). Who better, one might ask, to guide the reader through these layers of meaning than Legba, "the divine interpreter" who stands as "the textual or discursive principle itself" (Gates 24). My own interpretive project in the pages that follow is, initially, to marry this concept of biomythography as an outlaw genre with the Legba Principle to explicate and theorize Lorde's expressive creative collage.

As an outlaw genre, biomythography suggests that rules of expressive engagement are open ended and unpredictable. Clearly Lorde's use of the term insinuates construction of black selfhood that is polymorphous and transformative in its historico-fictional representation. In the stories of Zami, Audre, and Lorde, conventional binary oppositions of fact/fiction, myth/history, reality/imagination, and author/reader are mutually reinforcing. Traditional distinctions between past/present/future are also implicitly interrogated by Lorde's conscious and unconscious formal departures, such as those we witness with African Atlantic invocations of Great Time. Lorde's notions of time and space, her very act of narrative production, moves beyond established literary laws, at the same time seeking to locate Zami specifically within a cultural tradition that is rooted, grounded, and named as African Atlantic.

That Lorde titles her autobiography "Zami, A New Spelling of My Name" rather than "The Life of Audre Lorde" or "The Autobiography of Audre Lorde" is her first, titular announcement of departure from conventional form. "Zami," we are told by Lorde, is "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (255). Its inscription in her autobiography's title signals Lorde's invocation of a mythos derived from her African Atlantic origins. Titling, thus, serves as a radical act of renaming and redefining the self. As readers we immediately are self-reflexive, interpellated as participants in representational redefinitions, an expressive shift from predefined autobiographical models. And we recognize that Lorde's shift occurs in the context of a specific cultural and historical base. "Zami" is a Carriacou name. "A bold epigraph to the work," according to critic Carole Boyce Davies, in the Eastern Caribbean *Zami* is conventionally a pejorative term, meant to be demeaning ("Writing Home" 63).[2] Lorde's choice, therefore, is clearly a counterhegemonic and hence political act designed overtly to critique the oppressive heterosexism still prevalent in

the Caribbean. Lorde's formal subversions thus simultaneously challenge and subvert heterosexism, Eurocentrism, and phallocentrism. In this, they foreground *Zami*'s commitment to reshaping the contours of black female discursive production.

Such textural reshaping is usefully theorized by the concept of "quilted discourse." Lorde's aesthetics quilts together stories, myths, history, memory, and the imagination. Such womanist stitching works creatively to capture complexities and multivalences attending black female subjectivity, reifying the centrality and vitality of the Legba Principle. It is brilliantly fundamental to the poetics Lorde engages. Alice Walker, in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1974), has already made the case for the redefinition of quilting as a form of "high art," or at least enjoined that quilting be considered in conjunction with "high art" as a legitimate form of artistic and aesthetic expression. Central to Walker's thesis is the importance of leveling hierarchical structures that seek ethnocentrically to control artistic value. In her apologia for quilts, Walker claims space for the valorization of *alternative modes* of creative expression growing out of what she elsewhere terms "everyday use." In a similar vein, Lorde makes the case for the deployment of "everyday" orishas in the refiguration of art and value. Such mythic refiguration is at the heart of the Legba Principle in all its mythic resonance. The function of mythic thought traced through the lineage and lessons of the Carriacou women from whom she descends is *the* central organizing motif of Lorde's *Zami*; it provides the means through which Lorde both physically and symbolically locates the construction of Audre's lesbian sexuality. The narrator effuses: "*How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty*" (14, italics Lorde's).[3]

As if to cue her readers to differently apprehend the ensuing narrative structure of her biomythography, Lorde begins by asking: "*To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become . . . To whom do I owe the symbols of survival?*" (3, italics Lorde's). Her text is devoted to efficacious response to these questions, but not as a horological recounting. Her self-storying does not build toward a pivotal moment of transformation. Rather, the structuring agent for her narrative design is her *reconstruction* of encounters with the women Audre has lost, been hurt by, hurt, and—most important—loved.

She writes: "My father leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense, and unforgiving. But his is a distant lightning. *Images of women flaming like*

torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel that lead me home" (3, emphasis mine). The borders of Audre's journey, the defining points of her life story, even *Zami*'s narrative movement itself, ebb and flow around women's images that ultimately mark out a distinct formal status. Lorde utilizes both Carriacou mythic thought and Audre's relationships with women not merely as thematic concerns but also as structuring agents for narrative form.

Lorde formally and purposively steers *Zami* away from formal structures of the bildungsroman. Critics have pointed to a curious absence of analysis and annotation of Audre's sexual development, attributing such omissions to Lorde's refusal to ascribe to Audre a language that was probably unavailable to her at that stage of her development.[4] I would suggest instead, however, that Lorde's intentional refusal to include the internal working of Audre's movement toward lesbian identity is related to the author's purposive thwarting of the rules of autobiographical engagement.

In the conventional trajectory of autobiography—say, linear movement toward self-actualization—causality, internal dialogue, and reflection work symbolically/psychologically to impel the subject forward. There is no such linear causality and movement in *Zami*. Instead readers are forced to contend with their own expectations (purposively deflated by the author) regarding definitive gender epiphanies. In the absence of the "how and why" of it, readers are forced and indeed freed to participate in a writerly production of the polysemy of sexual identification. Doors of insight do not close with "revelation" but are thrown wide open for participation. Lorde's is most certainly what Barthes terms a "writerly text"; reading is a journey engineered by the Legba Principle.

In this same vein, Lorde's use of fictive analogues (e.g., characterization and dialogue), techniques of imaginative and creative representation, is also indicative of what I believe to be her culturally inflected, politically expedient definition and deployment of biomythography.[5] Lorde's narrative does follow a deceptively linear, chronological form. But she interrupts the narratological flow with italicized passages that appear to be narrated in dream-time, employing a hybrid prose/poetic form and narratively engaging in spatial/temporal movements that are indicative of Great Time. Most significant in these unautobiographically conventional stylistic departures—evidence of her engagement in radical acts of signifying upon

the conventional dictates of Euro-American discursive hegemony—is that they dispense with an overarching benchmark of authenticity from the onset.

By refusing to authorize, authenticate, or justify her life story, Lorde revisits and subverts early nineteenth-century racist dictates governing black subjectivity and its representation in print. Claudine Raynaud's affirmation that Lorde's "writing does not fill in the gaps of her being . . . [but] is instead an affirmation of being" (234) is salient. However, such affirmation, in the instance of *Zami*, cannot be fully appreciated outside a clear recognition of the history of racism vis-à-vis black autobiographical production. It is here that the reader immersed in the literacy of African Atlantic resistance is best equipped to decode Lorde's textual maneuvers, which unequivocally signify specifically on such racially inflected protocols. *Zami* interrogates and redefines not just "elite literature's laws" but also the specific historical applications of such laws with respect to African Atlantic autobiographical production.

Interruptions

Lorde signifies on autobiographical form by interrupting chronology. In the midst of her numerical chapters, she inserts two separate sections entitled "How I became a Poet" and "The Last of My Childhood Nightmares." The first begins in italics:

> *When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother's mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words*.
>
> My mother had a special and secret relationship with words, taken for granted as language because it was always there . . . Out of my mother's mouth a world of comment came cascading when she felt at ease or in her element, full of picaresque constructions and surreal scenes. (31)

Here, the discursive reconstruction spans dimensions of time: Audre's present relationship to language conjures up her mother's past speaking, but not as utterances passed; rather, mother/daughter speech exists symbiotically. Today's words spoken are yoked to yesterday's, yet both today's and

yesterday's expressions are subject to reassessment, reexamination, and by extension, reconstruction.

In *Zami*, present and past language uttered is neither fixed nor permanent but fluidly perpetual through time. The mother-and-daughter connection through language becomes ultimately linked to the rituals they share in the most seemingly insignificant yet indelibly emblazoned, intimate moments—as Audre sits between her mother's legs while her hair is being combed or when she crawls into her mother's bed and snuggles up to her breast (33). The language, the intimacy, the rituals—*these* become sources for Audre's poetry: "*I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as her hidden angers*" (32).

In contrast, the second narrative interruption is presented entirely in italics—a technique that reinforces the dreamscape of its insertion and clearly signals the interruption of chronology:

> *Hickory-skinned demons with long white hair and handsome demonical eyes stretch out arms wide as all tomorrow, across the doorway exit from a room through which I run, screaming, shrieking for exit . . . I then pass into another room of my parents' home—their bedroom, the room in which I am now asleep . . . Rhea is asleep, still, in my parents' bed. She is in great danger. I must save her from the great and nameless evil in this house . . . Suddenly I realize that in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome . . . This is no longer home; it is only of a past time. Once I realize this, I am suddenly free to go, and to take Rhea with me.* (199)

Like the earlier interruption, this one also moves between dimensions of time. Lorde is both in her parents' bedroom in her dream and in their bed asleep in *real* time, recognizing that she is dreaming. Significantly, both narrative insertions are focused upon the house in which she was reared. The former links her to rituals learned within it; the latter marks her separation from it—"this is no longer home."

At first blush, neither interruption seems strategically placed or purposive. The first seems triggered by the narrator's recounting of her first introduction to language in the painfully racist climate of a classroom where she was forced to wear "the dunce cap" while her classmates "dutifully entoned . . . Hail Marys for [her] soul" (31). The latter memory arises as Audre recalls when her roommate (Rhea) moved out. Rhea succumbs to pressure from her workmates, imposed upon her because she lived with a lesbian. Both interruptions are marked by soul-warping instances of

discrimination and alienation. That "home" in both instances signifies a site of belonging and unbelonging reflects the ambivalence of home in Audre's imaginary. What is signal about *Zami*'s narrative interruptions is that neither is integrated into preceding or succeeding chapters. They stand distinct and apart from the narrative flow. Such interruptions of chronology, though not sustained, force readers to experience viscerally the abrupt halt of readerly linearity. Whether one believes that the narrator's recounting mirrors the way things *actually happened* becomes secondary to the jolt of poetical, disruptive, lyrical reflection marked stylistically by italics. Readerly realism is foreclosed, and replaced, by writerly praxis in which we cannot help participating.

Throughout her narrative, Lorde uses italicized passages to foreground and affirm the vitality of mnemonic associations. The section in which Audre's "first love" Gennie and Gennie's subsequent suicide are described stands out as a notable example. Lorde begins the chapter thus: "*Things I never did with Genevieve: Let our bodies touch and tell the passions that we felt . . .*" (97). As the narration unfolds, Audre continues to describe the fantasies, dreams, and visions that she and Gennie shared, as well as those she desired for them both. The fact that Audre and Gennie never experience a physically intimate moment or that there was no indication (based upon Lorde's narration) that her feelings of love for Gennie were reciprocated is irrelevant. In the "dreamscape" of the biomythographic text, anything becomes *possible*, and everything is *envisionable*. Through her use of recounting marked by italics and nonlinear form, Lorde rejects burdensome race-specific codes and conventions of authentic representation. Through structural outlawry, she solicits readers to join with her in the mutuality of myth, history, and memory.

In her attempt to capture the multiple elements embedded by memory, Lorde moves across dimensions conventionally codified as reality and fantasy, realms shaped as well by conscious and unconscious desires. Her use of italics absolutely embodies the mnemonic workings of her imaginary, and more important perhaps, reveals the inadequacy of discursively ordering, polarizing, and labeling the very dimensions she crosses. Narrative interruption and cross-categorical flow create the open imaginative sequencing of Audre's life once she has departed her mother's house. The style and effect of such sequencing might be termed, in fact, "woman flow." Audre writes: "I found other women who sustained me and from whom I learned other loving." Immediately following this statement she continues: "*Their*

shapes join Linda and Gran' Ma Liz and Gran' Aunt Anni in my dreaming, where they dance with swords in their hands, stately forceful steps, to mark the time when they were warriors" (104, italics Lorde's). In the very singular act of reconstructing the moment of departure from her mother's house, the memory is tied to what would happen in her future (already experienced) relationships with women who taught her "other loving" *and* its significance emphasized by loving connections forged between memory, woman loving, and her matrilineal ancestry.

Lorde's narratological and thematic movements across time are quintessentially reflective of traditional West African ideas governing temporality. Under the aegis of Great Time, temporality is reckoned "for a concrete and specific purpose, *in connection with events* but not just for the sake of mathematics" (Mbiti 17, emphasis mine). In other words, this African time is organized not around days, months, or years but around significant events—what Mbiti calls "phenomenon" (17). Under the sign of Great Time as Mbiti elaborates it, autobiographical temporality would naturally take on aspects quite different from traditional chronology. Tasked with autobiographizing the past, Lorde, in accordance with the spirit of Great Time, organizes her text around events or phenomena and their relationship to the actualization of a black lesbian subjectivity. Attending this conception of phenomenological time is the belief that time extends beyond "individual life" and is experienced "partly through the society which goes back many generations before . . . [the individual's] own birth" (Mbiti 17). Hence Audre's invocation of Gran' Ma Liz and Gran' Aunt Anni reflects her desire directly to suture in Great Time her own life with ancestral lives that exist not in a foreclosed past but in a continually unfolding present.

Afrekete

In the final moments of *Zami*, Audre describes her sensual, intimate sexual experiences with Afrekete, the woman whose "print remains upon" her life "with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo" (253):

> We slipped off the cotton shifts we had worn and moved against each other's damp breasts in the shadow of the roof's chimney, making moon, honor, love, while the ghostly vague light drifting upward from the street

> competed with the shiny mirrors of our sweat-slippery dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide . . . *I remember the full moon like white pupils in the center of your wide irises. The moons went out, and your eyes grew dark as you rolled over me, and I felt the moon's silver light mix with the wet of your tongue on my eyelids. Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at the crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys*. (252)

The intense memory of Afrekete moves across time and space, Lorde's italics symbolizing both immediacy and distance. As with the other recounted descriptions, the Afrekete encounter breaks with generic expectations and thwarts readers' abilities to impose predetermined categories of meaning. But Afrekete is far more than simply another "character" in the text of Audre's life.

Many scholars have theorized about Lorde's invocation of the lesser-known West African goddess Afrekete in this her final homage paid to the narratological act of unfolding Audre's black lesbian subjectivity. At the beginning of *Zami* Lorde's litany of acknowledgments to the myriad women who shaped her identity for good or ill—the litany that narratologically stands at the crossroads between her acknowledgments and the prologue—ends with the following tribute:

> *To the journeywoman pieces of myself.*
> *Becoming*
> *Afrekete*. (5)

The epilogue concludes in a similar vein, with a panegyric to

> *Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become*. (255)

In other words, the narrative begins and ends with Afrekete. Even more significantly, the narrative commences with Afrekete as the *sign* of a quilted African Atlantic subjectivity and concludes by *assigning* her West African genealogy.

Among the Dahomean Fon, another name for Legba is "Aflakete," which, according to Robert Pelton, refers to the "trickster" aspect of Legba (72).[6]

In this regard, it has been frequently suggested that Lorde's invocation of Afrekete as a female version of Eshu/Legba signals her act of radically revisioning the idea that the province of the divine is the domain of males. In the traditional West African pantheon, several gods coterminously embody male and female aspects. There are male and female versions of the same god that either existed before Africans came to the New World or were later developed after they were brought there.[7] For example, Mawu-Lisa (whom Audre also acknowledges), is the Fon supreme creator. Mawu-Lisa, sometimes referred to only as Mawu, is the male aspect of the god whose domain is the moon; Lisa, the female aspect associated with the sun, is a bit more powerful and hence more frequently invoked than her male complement Mawu. Together they form an androgynous entity whose paired complementarity should not be evaluated by Western notions of gender differentiation and construction. The strict binary opposition between male and female, especially in terms of the norms, attitudes, and values ascribed to the two genders as they are socially constructed in the West, do not work the same way in terms of evaluating West African and African Atlantic relationships between gender and divinity. And yet, despite Legba's potential to embody such gender dualisms, this orisha is most often referred to using the male pronoun. I do so here as well, but not because I wish to privilege a patriarchal norm; as indicated, I do so because I am specifically invoking Papa Legba and his revolutionary Haitian heritage. In a similar vein, Lorde's invocation of Afrekete rather than Eshu or Legba must be read as an ideologically inflected choice that is not simply revising the New World African orisha pantheon in female terms but rather invokes and signifies on the very concept of gender construction and differentiation.

Like her male counterpart Legba, Afrekete is potent in what is commonly defined as her trickster aspect, particularly in relation to her linguistic and hermeneutical prowess. Audre herself designates Afrekete as a mischievous linguist and divine trickster. But as I have already suggested, the distinction between trickster and tempter is significant. The trickster is concerned with her hermeneutical prowess; the tempter is concerned with the *hermeneutical process*. Most important, the tempter is the aegis under which the lessons of the crossroads can be apprehended. Audre's praisesong to Afrekete (cited above) is instructive in this regard.

Audre's entreaty to Afrekete regarding the crossroads at which they meet is not governed by a desire to remain in an indeterminate space whose

potency lies in its indeterminacy. Rather, the prayer enunciated by the ritual of bodies meeting is "*that the discarded evils, abandoned at the crossroads, will not follow [them] upon [their] journeys*" (Lorde 252).[8] What evils lay abandoned at the crossroads? At the crossroads lies the danger of succumbing to temptations of "the self-determining ego" rather than engaging the exercise of "human agency" inherent in mythic thought (Henry 185). Such agency is accessed not in isolation but in harmony with the divine. Hence Lorde's text reverses prototypical patriarchal myths of origin through its invocation of Afrekete and at the same time such reenvisioning imbues Lorde's radical act of producing an autochthonous black female subjectivity.[9]

But Lorde's subversion of patriarchy through her invocation of Afrekete is not, however, the end of the story. If Afrekete is the spiritual aegis under which such radical transformation is made possible, then Carriacou is the site Lorde posits as an originary (edenic) space to "house," so to speak, her countervailing myth of origins: "Once *home* was a long ways off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother's mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home. There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood" (Lorde 256). Carriacou, then, as a necessary geographic site around which to construct Audre's cultural identity fades by the end of the narrative and is supplanted by an image of that island as a mythic/edenic space. Claudine Raynaud describes this space, Carriacou, as a virtual "lesbian utopia" (223).

In critical analyses of *Zami*, references to Carriacou as a mythic, imaginative site are everywhere and abounding. Raynaud further refers to Carriacou as "the magical island" (223). Erin Carlston depicts "Audre's evocation of mythological Carriacou" as "a fiction that is potent precisely because it is fiction and *so uncompromised by materiality* that it lends her politics a strength" (235, emphasis mine). Raynaud continues, "The words of the mother used by the daughter *erase exile, eliminate distance* in space and time. They lead the reader to the *paradisiacal island*, the vision of which is handed down across generations" (225, emphasis mine). Such fantastical inscriptions interpellate Carriacou into familiar discourses of colonial conquest. The Caribbean becomes simply an empty, albeit alluring, blank slate or empty canvas upon which to paint poetic idealizations and project egotistical desires. That Lorde's invocation of Carriacou appears

simultaneously to subvert patriarchal hegemony on the one hand but also to reinscribe the appropriative colonial gaze on the other warrants careful scholarly consideration. The salience of Paget Henry's proposition that the mythopoetic is conventionally subordinated to the politico-economic within African Atlantic discourse becomes compellingly relevant in this regard. But perhaps such is the risk of revising privileged discursive modes, like Autobiography, using a semantical twist codified by "myth" in a readerly space that has not yet grappled with or deconstructed the very epistemological foundations upon which it is conventionally based.

Forward Ever, Backward Never

Carriacou has undoubtedly served as an important geospatial metaphor for the articulation of a specifically African diaspora feminist subjectivity. In addition to its centrality in Lorde's text, Carriacou functions in Barbadian American Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) as a reconstitutive site of identity for Marshall's protagonist, Avey Johnson. The tendency of writers like Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall to "romanticize lands in which they have spent considerably less time than their parents" is, according to Giselle Anatol, somewhat common (131). Such a tendency is in some ways a natural consequence of learning about *home* primarily from the stories, memories, and nostalgia of migrant mothers.[10]

As in *Zami*, Carriacou and its inhabitants are spiritually restorative for Avey in *Praisesong*. Rituals enacted and performed on the actual island of Carriacou work to reconnect the middle-aged African American Avey to her forgotten cultural roots: "[N]ow suddenly, as if she were that girl again, with her entire life to live, she felt the threads streaming out . . . from their sacred eyes . . . and their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming" (249). And yet, having deeply engaged Carriacou rituals that would secure her psychic/emotional restoration, Avey thinks "[t]he island more a mirage rather than an actual place. Something conjured up perhaps to satisfy a longing and need. S*he was leaving Carriacou without having really seen it*" (254, emphasis mine). In a similar vein, Audre emotionally "leaves" Carriacou without really having seen it, only to "[discover] its latitudes when [it] was no longer home" (*Zami* 256).

There is perhaps something troubling about situating black subject formation against the backdrop of a national space whose materiality is relegated to the realm of fiction and as a *requisite* for identity construction. We might hearken back to the criticism of *Zami* that consistently yokes an uncompromised-by-materiality Carriacou to notions of paradise, magic, and myth as these constructs are defined and understood in Western Discourse. Nations, as has been argued, are perhaps "imagined." They are not, however, imaginary. Interrogating this dialectic between nation and imagination gives rise to the following pertinent questions: *Who* is imagining the nation? (In other words, what is the relationship between the subject imagining and the nation he/she invents?) *What* is in fact being imagined? And *for what purposes* is the nation imagined in the way that it is? In the estimation of several critics who have queried the potentially colonial/patriarchal cast of Audre's imaginings toward Carriacou/Afrekete, any parallelism drawn is patently undercut by Lorde's reification of a black lesbian aesthetic whose pleasure-seeking impulses militate against the colonial venture.[11]

Thus Lorde's metonymic linkage between woman and landscape radically diverges from the penetrating and consumptive imperatives of the colonial enterprise. I think that we can all agree that the marginalization and systemic exclusion of triply oppressed black lesbian communities inevitably produces a differently ordered engagement with land, women, nation, and identity than that of white male patriarchy. At the same time, there is on the one hand the invocation of woman's body as landscape; on the other hand, the use of landscape as woman's body clearly produces a drastically different set of responses, particularly when that landscape has not only been formerly colonized but has also literally been contemporarily subjected to military invasion. It is here that a writerly engagement informed by the literacy of African Atlantic resistance becomes vital.

Carriacou is a part of the independent nation-state of Grenada and the Grenadines, which gained its independence in 1974. On March 13, 1979, the Grenadian New Jewel Movement, under the leadership of Maurice Bishop, fomented a bloodless coup and seized power from then–Prime Minister Sir Eric Gairy. Gairy's regime, which commenced with a platform for engendering social justice for the working classes, instituting land reform, denouncing class/color elitism, and calling for national sovereignty,

gave way to ever-escalating corruption, sharp economic decline, increased poverty and unemployment, and increasing authoritarianism. Hence, the stage was set for fundamental radical change. This change would come under the leadership of Maurice Bishop. In the aftermath of the 1979 coup, Bishop assumed the post of prime minister and leader of the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG), Grenada and the Grenadines's governing body.

When Lorde published *Zami* in 1982, Grenada had enjoyed three years of unprecedented economic growth and positive social change. As Lorde asserts in her collection of essays *Sister Outsider*, published in 1984, "I am proud to be of stock from the country that mounted the first Black English–speaking People's Revolution, in this hemisphere" (189). Carole Boyce Davies relevantly points out that "Lorde's connectedness to the Caribbean has its impetus in *revolutionary* Grenada (not colonial Grenada) and the sense of possibility and challenge which it held" (*Black Women* 122, emphasis mine). As a consequence, Lorde's invocation of Carriacou and by extension Grenada in *Zami* must be read over and against the revolutionary politico-economic realities that helped to produce the textual nation of her imaginary. Revolutionary Grenada's prospects looked bright in 1982, when *Zami* was in fact published. By August, Grenada and the Grenadines had one of the lowest debt ratios in the world, and the World Bank gave "a glowing report" on Grenada's economy (Payne, Sutton, and Thorndike 24). But (and this is a central "but") the PRG was ideologically socialist and therefore the implicit ideological and economic adversary of the United States.

Grenada and the Grenadines were invaded on October 25, 1983, by the United States under President and Commander in Chief Ronald Reagan. Justifications for the invasion were manifold and there remain discrepant perspectives regarding events leading up to the invasion. Certainly, the rise of neoliberalism, the election of Reagan to the presidency, persisting "Cold War" praxis, Grenada's political alliance with Cuba, the 1980 elections of politically conservative governments in St. Vincent, Antigua, and Jamaica—all of which philosophically rejected radical politics—were precipitating factors. There were also the regional political conflicts between Grenada and Trinidad, and Grenada and Guyana respectively as motivating factors (Payne, Sutton, and Thorndike 93). Additionally, the existence of corrosive power struggles internal to the PRG, coupled with differing

perspectives on balancing Marxist-Leninist ideology, socialist praxis, and politico-economic pragmatism, fomented a full breakdown at the highest levels of Bishop's government.

It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to unfold the entire political, ideological, and socioeconomic contexts of U.S.-invasion economies. I must leave such scholarly wisdom to my colleagues in the social sciences. But it seems relevant to point out that one of the most salient (and well-documented) accounts of the invasion is to be found in the concluding chapter of Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report" (176). In the days leading up to and by the end of the invasion, Maurice Bishop was assassinated, hundreds of lives were lost, and Grenada was devastated.

In "Grenada Revisited," Lorde writes:

> Unemployment in Grenada dropped 26 percent in four years. On October 25, 1983 American Corsair missiles and naval shells and mortars pounded into the hills behind Grenville, St. Georges, Gouyave. American marines tore through homes and hotels searching for "Cubans." Now the Ministries are silent. The state farms are at a standstill. The cooperatives are suspended . . . On the day after the invasion, unemployment was back up to 35 percent. A cheap, acquiescent labor pool is the delight of supply side economics. (181)

The magical *paradisiacal* island, the mythological nation-space, finds itself one year after *Zami* is published *materially* penetrated by missiles and pounded by naval shells, mortars, and invasive tools of global econometrics. In the hands of those with power—men and women alike—the island (like woman's body) is subject to ravishment, violence, and appropriation. Hence, the conflation of landscape as woman appearing in the Afrekete moment of *Zami* turns suddenly, not upon the issue of a "penetrating" masculine colonial gaze, one subsumable by the power of an alternative female-centered erotics, but rather the conflation, as history actually unfolded and new and depressing material conditions became manifest, came to turn precisely on the relegation of a nation to a vulnerable landscape upon which "patriot games" could be played out with little or no negative consequences for the patriots.

In fact, while Lorde and Marshall were writing and publishing their deeply enriching and powerfully evocative narratives, at whose center lay

the Grenadine island of Carriacou, the United States (in 1981) was openly rehearsing its invasion of Grenada (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 182). In "Grenada Revisited," Lorde specifically details the military operations of 1981 that preceded the 1983 invasion. Returning to Grenada in 1983, two months after the U.S. invasion ravaged that country, her revisiting of the island is, I would argue, both materially literal and informatively symbolic. "Grenada Revisited" is, according to Boyce Davies, "a fitting conclusion to the journeys embarked on in *Zami*" ("Writing Home" 121). For Lorde's revisiting of Grenada and the Grenadines in *Sister Outsider* in the aftermath of the invasion indeed produces a radical rewriting of the Grenada of *Zami*.

Revisionist poetics mark her later work not because she is any less committed to challenging Western discursive formations by subverting simple binary oppositions such as fact/fiction, myth/history, or memory/imagination. Her poetics are revised because she is committed to redressing *all* critical formulations surrounding Carriacou that cast the island as *only* fictive, mythic, and imaginative. The revolutionary formal poetics that textures *Zami* are emptied and bereft of potency if their by-product is the reproduction of a colonial ideology that imagines, and by extension, engages the Caribbean in principally imperialist ways.

Just as Audre's mother's language is subject to reassessment and reconstruction in the face of unfolding material reality beyond the nostalgia of "home," so too is Lorde's imaging of Carriacou. In "Grenada Revisited," she writes:

> Revolution. A nation decides for itself what it needs . . . What did the Revolution in Grenada mean? It meant the inauguration of an agro-industry . . . It meant almost doubling the number of doctors on the island . . . a health center set up in every parish . . . a dental clinic . . . It meant twelve-year-old Lyndon Adams of L'Esterre, Carriacou, teaching a seventy-three-year-old woman how to read and write as part of the each-one-teach-one program . . . Lyndon . . . was quoted as saying: "Before the revolution we were not in the light. I will never give up. I rather they kill me dead than I go work for them if they come to take over we land and try to oppress we again." (179, 186–87)

Thus speak Carriacou and her inhabitants. They have now been visited and are now known as an actual place, not a mirage—Carriacouans are seen

and heard. Their revolutionary spirit first imagined and recast in *Zami* is fully embodied by Lyndon Adams who declares, "I rather they kill me dead" than succumb to oppression. Lyndon's spirit joins with the spirits of "*Linda and Gran' Ma Liz and Gran' Aunt Anni*" who in Audre's dreaming "*dance with swords in their hands, stately forceful steps, to mark the time when they were warriors*" (*Zami* 104).

The Mattering Core

In the epilogue to *Zami*, Lorde describes the process of "push[ing] speech into poetry" as "the mattering core" (256). I read this concept of "the mattering core" as a metaphor for the interstitial site where discourse, epistemology, hermeneutics, and praxis converge at the crossroads. For it is precisely at such crossroads that chaos transforms into possibility. Such transformation is in a physical and metaphysical sense both *core* and *matter*: ephemeral, ethereal, and material. It is of course at this crossroads that Legba resides, where we are both tempted to reject his lessons *and* are empowered to engage a revolutionary praxis. Lorde's formal poetics transport us to a place where familiar ways of reading might be shed and new forms of imagining and articulating African Atlantic subjectivity made possible, even as we grasp the limitations of their forming. Her "art" is unequivocally art produced for the sake of illumination and transformation. Such art has "àshe." A gift from the Supreme Creator, àshe "is divine force incarnate" (Thompson 7).

Art that has àshe possesses the power to transform—the kind of revolutionary potency that Lorde locates, for instance, in "the transformation of silence into language and action" (*Sister Outsider* 42). Such praxis, Lorde would argue, resides in the act of pushing speech into poetry; she asserts as much in her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury":

> Within living structures defined by profit, *by linear power*, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive . . . But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They surface in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom . . . Those dreams are made realizable through our

> poems . . . If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as luxury, then we give up the *core* . . . *we give up the future of our worlds*. (39, emphasis mine)

That Lorde directly yokes economic exploitation, patriarchal oppression, and emotional suppression to *linear power* should not by now be surprising. Clearly, hers is a narratology that recognizes the power of prescriptive, predictive, and circumscribing linearity to silence, render invisible, and oppress. A recuperation of feeling, of dream, of memory, of history, of myth, and of ancestry—the province of the divine and the divine within us necessitates the creation of a revolutionary poetics. Audre Lorde's *Zami* sets us on exactly such a journey. Ultimately, we may discover what all radical contraventions of power and traditional poetry are forced to recognize: revolutions are never permanent. Still, the poetics that often envision and frequently help create them keep a collaged vision of infinite possibility always alive in our own spirit and consciousness so that in some future true human decency will found its liberatory existence on equitably shared and inhabited material islands of hope.

I had no nation now but the imagination.
—Derek Walcott, "The Schooner 'Flight'"

Those who must work and produce surplus value for others will necessarily grasp their own solidarity—initially, in the unarticulated form of rage, helplessness, victimization, oppression by a common enemy—before the dominant or ruling class has any particular incentive for doing so.
—Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

I hate the classism that I grew up with. I hate the system of oppressing other people of color . . . I hate the sexism, the extraordinary double standards. It's unbelievable.
—Michelle Cliff, interview with Opal Palmer Adisa

3 Race, Nation, and the Imagination
Michelle Cliff's No Telephone to Heaven

Best noted for her powerfully evocative prose-poetic form that captures in stark, visceral terms the socioeconomic, political, historical, and cultural challenges that frame contemporary Jamaica, Michelle Cliff's work, like Johnson's and Lorde's, wrestles with the limitations and the possibilities of narrative form, historiography, African Atlantic subjectivity, and the creative imagination. The imagination is the site within which textured alternatives to familiar and reductive narratives of African Atlantic subjectivity are crafted. At the same time, African Atlantic subject formation and its literary representation are shaped by material realities. In Cliff's case, such material concerns are inextricably tied to the trauma of colonization, its attendant class and color stratification, and the perpetuation of systems of oppression impacting both the representation of postcolonial subjectivity and formal strategies she employs to treat the attenuating intersections of race, nation, and the imagination.

Cliff aptly describes the challenges of writing out of colonialism's historical legacies in her collection of prose and poetry, *The Land of Look Behind* (1985): "One of the effects of assimilation, indoctrination, passing into the anglocentrism of the British West Indian culture is that you believe absolutely in the hegemony of the King's English and in the form in which it is meant to be expressed. Or else your writing is not literature; it is folklore, and folklore can never be art" (13). Here, Cliff charts the struggle literally to liberate her "tongue" from the woodenness of an enforced colonial language steeped in hierarchical values and binary oppositions, the kind of discursive violence that invariably attends the colonizing imperative: white over black, Christian over African, English over nation language, male over female, rich over poor, possessor over dispossessed. This discursive battle to creatively articulate and frame postcolonial subjectivity against a historical backdrop of an impinging and circumscribing discourse and its epistemological assumptions accounts in part for the disruptive narratology Cliff employs. Hers is no *mere* folklore. If James Weldon Johnson and Audre Lorde interrupt the linear, chronological dictates and conventional culturally imposed assumptions of Autobiography, History, and Narrative, Michelle Cliff's disruptive narratological form unsettles, fractures, and brings disorder to conventional literary renditions of the nation, history, subjectivity, and Discourse itself.

Published in 1987, *No Telephone to Heaven*, Cliff's novel, uses a distinct prose-poetic form to interrogate post-Independence Jamaica and the individual/citizen's responsibility to participate actively in the nation-building process. Cliff consciously situates individual identity formation alongside national identity formation, positing them as mutually reinforcing sites of interrogation. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, the Caribbean topography is named, can be placed historically, and is necessarily materially inflected; the ego/consciousness of her principal narrating subject is always already imbricated within the historicized political economy of the Jamaican nation-state, within and against which she constructs her identity. Cliff, thus, definitively reframes conventional impulses to prioritize the *mythopoetic* over the *politico-economic*.[1] As a consequence, her postcolonial protagonist Clare Savage is *fragmented* (in the familiar sense) not simply because of her cultural, physical, and linguistic hybridity but also as a direct function of the postcolonial space in which she is situated.

The country of Clare's "character" is one struggling with the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), destabilization by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and militarization of the working class along political party lines. Clare most certainly has a nation, fraught though it may be by all of the economic, political, and cultural incumbencies of forging a new national identity. Jamaica is not an incidental landspace within which to situate the dramatic action of the main character's ego/consciousness formation—ego/consciousness and national consciousness are symbiotic, even as the novel leaves off before fully imagining tangible social transformation for the nation. Cliff makes it clear, however, that complex grappling with the politico-economic consequences of the colonial project underpinned by its ideological imperatives must frame any engagement with African Atlantic subjectivity.

Chanting down Babylon

Much of the dramatic action of *No Telephone to Heaven* is set during the decades of the 1960s through the 1980s and encompasses the bloody and violent upheavals that textured Jamaican politics, social, and cultural life during the mid-1970s through the early 1980s.[2] The disillusionment of the post-Independence moment arrived quickly upon the heels of the hoisting of the Jamaican flag in 1962. Michael Manley, president of the People's National Party (PNP) and prime minister of Jamaica between 1972 and 1980 (the period that frames much of the novel), advocated democratic socialism during a global climate that successfully propagandized the threat of communist infiltration in the Caribbean region.[3] The growing tide of conservatism in the West, coupled with the rise of unabashed consumer capitalism, made Manley's unapologetic, anti-imperialist, anticolonial stance incredibly threatening. Like the Grenadian Maurice Bishop, Manley instituted a series of socioeconomic reforms, which emphasized education, healthcare, housing, and employment and were in keeping with social-justice ideals and working-class values.[4]

Most threatening to global capital interests and the neoliberal (read neocolonial) ideology which attended them during Manley's tenure as Prime Minister, was his move to nationalize various industries. For this

posture his government was financially and politically penalized by the international community.[5] As a consequence, the Jamaican economy, as was the case with numerous former colonial outposts, was in dire straits, struggling with rising unemployment, shortage of foreign exchange, and declining exports. Independence had come in symbolic but certainly not material terms for the majority of Jamaica's black working class.

The political violence that marked the 1976 and 1980 elections reflected the disillusionment of a people for whom the achievement of sovereignty could not deliver its promise. The militarization of the working classes via the mass importation and dissemination of firearms during the bloody 1976 and 1980 elections became the mechanism through which this clash of ideology, global capital, deflated national expectations, politics, and poverty came to a head. *No Telephone* depicts this period in graphic, dread, apocryphal terms:

> Guns were not strangers to them. Tivoli Gardens and Red Hills had run with their blood. Staining the cement-block walls some of them had set in place . . . Spilling into cesspools some of them had dug . . . In the seventies they entered the territory of the opposition, their own party's line held tight in their heads. They entered the territory of opposition with guns and rocks and Red Stripe bottles with flaming tops, filled with kerosene. They called themselves po-lict-ti-cal men. They said they had mighty leaders they trusted. One called himself Joshua, [Michael Manley] who would lead them out of the wilderness.
>
> How him could know the wilderness would be so difficult to cross.
>
> They fired missiles at each other. They bled. NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. (18)

Such is the social, political, and historical frame, the "social template" as it were, to recur to Fredric Jameson, of Cliff's *No Telephone*.

The central dramatic action of the narrative, namely, the principal act of revolutionary struggle in which the main narrator engages and around which the narratological trajectory is framed, is necessarily and quite purposefully rendered during the post-Manley era of the early 1980s. As such, Clare is situated squarely within a nation that is both traumatized and ideologically in-transition, fractured and fragmented, as it were, by its recent fraught history and even deeper and more materially by its unrepentant colonial past. Juxtaposed against Clare, who is privileged, white, and

mobile, is Christopher, another central character in Cliff's text. A gardener for the family that he subsequently slaughters in an unpremeditated act of vengeance, Christopher embodies the dispossessed, invisible, black, and impoverished African Atlantic subject whose story is frequently bypassed in the prioritized discourses of postcolonial angst, creolization, hybridity, and transnationalism.

In 1980, when Prime Minister Edward Seaga, leader of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), assumed his post, the shift from so-called left politics to a posture that was much more in keeping with neoliberal Washington consensus was underway. Promising Washington that he would break ties with Cuba, supporting the U.S.-led invasion of Grenada (discussed in chapter 2), and aligning himself squarely with U.S. president Ronald Reagan, Seaga and the JLP symbolized (certainly at least in theory) a radical movement away from the social justice goals of Manley and the PNP.[6] Reaganomic "trickle down theory," with its emphasis on a capital-driven policy as a mechanism for effecting eventual or gradual social change, was characteristically associated with the newly elected regime.

Free enterprise and financial efficiency were the rallying cries of the JLP.[7] Underlying these dramatic politico-economic transformations throughout the African Atlantic was a paradigmatic shift in terms of the discourse around poverty. The Discourse of Free Enterprise, with its salvational assurances, militated against and in fact suppressed the efficacy of countervailing, historically informed discourses, which accounted for the impact of racism, institutionalized forms of color discrimination, and the economic consequences of the Trans-Atlantic Slavery and Colonial projects. Thus, the politico-ideological shift from a 1970s model of democratic socialism to this early 1980s embrace of neoliberalism is fully implicated in Cliff's textual treatment of Christopher, his invisible status within the society, and the bleak, abject poverty into which he is born. Emphasis on capital growth as the means by which national security could be achieved shifted the focus from the very factors that had thwarted its achievement in the first place. If Jamaica could grow its industries, liberalize its markets, and attract investment, then it could emerge as a viable nation-state.

The problem with this theory, however, as Cliff's novel readily exposes, was that it failed to account for the historical inequities already built into the system—inequities in terms of race, in terms of color, and most certainly in terms of class. At the core of the colonial legacy is a rigid class

structure. At the same time, social class hierarchy is, as in any formerly colonized space where people of color have been dominated by whites, invariably yoked to color. Thus, access, socioeconomic mobility, enfranchisement, and visibility are dialectically figured in relation, quite literally, to coincidences of birth and station. The exposure of color/class inequities and their cultural, social, and material consequences are the principal thematic concerns of *No Telephone*.

For instance, Cliff's text imaginatively recalls the aforementioned moment of political implosion from the perspective of working-class Jamaican nationals living in North America, whose migration in search of socioeconomic mobility is experientially textured by the self-same ethnocentrically repressive attitudes they ostensibly fled: "And some of their mothers and sisters, applying cleaning fluids to the fake-tudor homes of Toronto or fighting teenager roaches in the high-rise condominiums of New York, saw the reports on CBC or CBS that Jamaica was about to hexplode. Tourism was suffering. Vacationers were endangered. The stench of burning Michelins cut into the night. The mother or the sister try to reach home. NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN" (18). The "mother" or "sister" displaced in North America watches the political upheaval on tv, while her "mistress" looks on in condescension and says, "Well, I guess that's another place they've ruined for us" (18). Because they need employment and are undocumented workers, the women in this scene are stonily, stoically silent, internalizing and suppressing their rage, unable to tell "the blood-clat bitch" what they really think; they are rendered inarticulate, silenced by their economic vulnerability, suffering too while "she husband panting and blowing" in their faces. The complex of politico-economic forces that link political upheaval, migration, economic and sexual exploitation, tourism, racism, and poverty remain largely unexamined and unarticulated by all but those who suffer under such oppressive circumstances. Thus, in Cliff's text, rigid social stratification is not unique to the British West Indies; rather, these color/class hierarchical formations cut across geography and time.

In the narratological trajectory of the novel, seemingly random events unfold in apparently sporadic order, setting in context the social templates that conspire to produce Christopher's pivotal/climatic act of violence. The geospatial movement of the textual action moves fluidly across the waters from North America and back. At "home," the Jamaican working classes suffer through the condescending behavior of the "cuffy-pretend-backra

or backra-fe-true" (19), brown and white Jamaicans from the privileged classes whose values mirror their North American counterparts:

> A man could be kept waiting for hours on end, and the mistress, or the master, or the son, or the daughter, or the relative who lodged with them would never even think to say, "Sorry Winston, to waste your afternoon so." That was the worst of being a servant. The waiting around . . . the people in the house assuming your time was worthless. Assuming you could not judge the beauty of a ginger blossom or arrange roses of peace in a cut-glass vase . . . You had to listen [to] . . . their opinion that there were by now too many cars in Kingston, or what kind of mess is Manley trying to make of Jamaica, how him can surround himself with such ruffians they ask, never realizing a ruffian is serving them dinner, or realizing it all the while but wanting to let the ruffian know that he is to be kept in this dining room come hell or high water. Come Armageddon to Babylon. (19–20)

Here Cliff reaffirms the inextricability of the operations of race, class, and neoliberal ideology. Readers cannot fully grapple with the fragmented psyche of a black working class character like Christopher without literately engaging society's entrenched historical commitment to maintaining white supremacy—a supremacy that is in this case not necessarily marked by skin color but unquestioningly marked by ideology: "Come hell or high water," that "ruffian" [read working class black man] must be kept in his place.

Cliff poignantly ruminates about the socially constructed color/class stratification that embodied her own childhood in Jamaica in her essay "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire":

> *Looking Back:* To try to see when the background changed places with the foreground. To try to locate the vanishing point: where the lines of perspective converge and disappear. Lines of color and class. Lines of history and social context. Lines of denial and rejection. When did *we* (the light-skinned middle-class Jamaicans) take over for *them* as oppressors? I need to see when and how this happened. When what should have been the reality was overtaken by what was surely unreality. When the house nigger became master. (*Land of Look Behind* 62)

No Telephone to Heaven does not try to unpack "when and how this happened." The novel does not attempt to rewrite a History of colonialism and

its aftermath from the perspective of the dispossessed. It exonerates neither the nation-state, which has failed to deliver upon its promise, nor does it exonerate the neoglobal order, which unquestioningly impacts such deliverance. Neither does *No Telephone to Heaven* glibly excoriate the African Atlantic subjects who reside within Jamaica's borders, whether privileged or working class, black or white. Engaged in fissuring (in the Glissantian sense) dominant, hegemonizing discursive formations framing class, race, color, history, culture, identity, colonialism, independence, and the like, *No Telephone* potently captures the disillusionment of the post-Independence moment in Jamaica. Such disillusionment inheres in Langston Hughes's poignant lines "what happens to a dream deferred?" What happens when the dream of Independence can only be an imaginative construct, its efficacy thwarted by a people whose failure to imagine alternative narratives of African Atlantic subjectivity and community reproduces the very structures they sought to dismantle? Such rhetorical questioning is in the lament of Cliff's text. How, then, can social transformation be imagined in the midst of such postcolonial "straits"?

History

The necessity of developing what I call a "literacy of African Atlantic resistance" is manifested in and by reader responses to the thematic and formal disruptions, the fissuring of a single History, the fracturing of linear, chronological Discourse, in which *No Telephone* engages. In an interview with Opal Palmer Adisa, Cliff discusses the centrality of offering, specifically, alternative histories of resistance to oppression. Asked by Adisa whether or not she would describe herself as a "political writer," Cliff responds from the onset with *history*: "I started out as a historian; I did my graduate work in history. I've always been struck by the misrepresentation of history and have tried to correct received versions of history, especially the history of resistance. It seems to me that if one does not know that one's people have resisted, then it makes resistance difficult" (280). For Cliff, history and politics are inextricably linked. Thus, Cliff's ideologically inflected narrative conscientiously weaves together an African Atlantic history of resistance, shaped by complex politico-economic templates and situated within a narratological framework that structurally challenges

received versions of history. As a consequence, historiographic Discourse marked by linear causality, conventionally associated with "received versions of history," is in this text marked by heteroglossia, polyphony, and intricate strands of causalities. Perhaps this cross-disciplinary, cross-generic perspective helps account for the ways in which Cliff structures her narrative. The fabric of the novel is organized around what I would describe as a *recursion to materiality*. In each unfolded narrative sequence the fabric of the text quilts historical, poetic, mythic, political, symbolic, and material discourses that frame the colonial project and its aftermath. Quilted as it is, the form framing such ideologically charged revelations is necessarily resilient, capturing on the one hand the mythopoetic/politico-economic complexities it seeks to encompass. On the other hand, the form materially *thwarts* the linear movement of "evil" attending Discourses, as they seek to simplify, to chronologize, to, in fact, ascribe imperializing cause-and-effect templates through which to read (and ultimately script) African Atlantic subjectivity, historiography, and continuity.

After briefly introducing us in the beginning of the novel to the (as-yet-unnamed) protagonist who is riding with other "comrades" bearing arms in a truck called "No Telephone to Heaven" on an undisclosed mission in Cockpit County in Jamaica, Cliff shifts the temporal/spatial movement of her text to the circumstances surrounding Christopher's acts of bloodshed. Readers are thus initially confronted with parallel narratives. Clare's and Christopher's journeys barely intersect in terms of plot, causality, or characterization. They exist as parallax. Hence, piecing their stories together to glean and apprehend meaning is surely an exercise in and by extension produces an alternative literacy and resistant history. This is only achievable if one is willing to do the writerly work of resistive reading.

Rather than being organized around chronological time, causality, or even phenomenon (as in Great Time), the repetition of the phrase "No Telephone to Heaven" becomes the structuring agent for the unfolding of events, which are ultimately revealed by the narrative's end. Like a jazz riff, "NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN" announces the narratological breaks in form, the temporal movements, shifting spaces, and alternating narrators and their stories. NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN riffs too on the epistemologically expansive meaning vested in this bleak appellative, punctuating vivid characterological descriptions, portending deadly events, vaguely introducing a mysterious mission, and riffing powerfully on the failure of

religion, whether Christian, African, or syncretic, to deliver the people from their oppression:

> NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. No voice to God. A waste to try. Cut off. No way of reaching out or up . . . The motto suited them. Their people. The place of their people's labor . . . They once had the belief. Especially the old people . . . The ones in the balmyard. But Jesus no balm . . . Begging Jesus. Jah. Moses. Shàngò. Yemanjà. Oshun. God no mus' be deaf . . . Depression. Downpression. Oppression. Recession. Intercession. Commission. Omission. Missionaries . . . Yes, mi dear bredda. NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN . . . We have been royally deceived. Who God like? Not we. NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN . . . They were tired of praying for those that persecuted them. (*No Telephone to Heaven* 16–18)

Here, the double entendre–laden jazz structure inheres in the rhetorically cast question *Who God like?* In the dystopic world of *No Telephone*, God neither favors, phenotypically or otherwise, his balmyard-praying subjects, who in a latter narrative instance refuse to believe that "the real true Jesus, . . . a small dark man with a hump on his back," was "Black as his mother was black" (36). This internalization of colonial values, this refusal to embrace a syncretic worldview (for clearly the depiction of Jesus is also a depiction of Legba) coupled with the failure of religion to provide deliverance from poverty and oppression sound out deep, plaintive, wailing chords of disillusionment both by and for Jamaica's citizens, all of which are captured in dread: NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN, indeed. Like a Coltrane *Love Supreme* interstice—halfway between death and resurrection—NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN moves us raw and jagged with emotion, between and among events leading up to and culminating with the bloody deaths, by his hands, of Christopher's employers and their domestic worker (Mas' Charles, Charles's wife, daughter, and son Paul H., and the family's "helper" Mavis).[8]

Nervous Conditions

The fabric of Christopher's story, then, is very much imbricated within the aforementioned narratives of race, nation, and ideology; always already attending these are the socioeconomic, material realities of living under

abject poverty. Christopher lives at first with his grandmother and then alone in a shantytown called "Dungle"—"the dung-heap jungle where people squirmed across mountains of garbage," where "children with swirls of white ringworm" and "rounded bellies" lived and where "most of the children . . . did not go school" (31–33). Here, the reader is transported into the world of destitution and squalor and the attendant crisis of alienation ushering from such absence of basic material needs.

What kind of value on human life can one place, the narrative rhetorically questions, if one's own life is defined by continual, systematic, and palpable devaluation? Cliff writes, "Like his labor, his [Christopher's] connections to other people were casual. If he had thought about it, he would realize that there was not one single smaddy in the world who cared if he lived or died. His death would cause inconvenience to no one—unless him dead on dem property. In this loneliness he longed for his grandmother." (44) Though dead for thirteen years, Christopher's grandmother is not at rest because she has not been buried properly. Communicating her wishes from beyond the spiritually insufficient "grave," she tells him, "Me no want walk ya so till de end of time, mi son. Me no want fe roam wid chain 'pon me neck like rollin' calf" (40). In Jamaican folklore, a rolling calf is said to wander the country at night with a chain clanking behind it, symbolizing a disquieted spirit that has not been ritualistically buried in a way to ensure smooth transition to the afterlife. Christopher's grandmother remains via his memory, his only link to the chain of humanity. When he discovers that he might be able to access government records, exhume her body, and bury her properly, he decides to go to Mas' Charles, his brown-skinned, upper-middle-class employer, to ask for a piece of land upon which she might be buried. When Christopher is characteristically condescendingly rebuffed by Mas' Charles, Christopher kills him, his wife Miss Evelyn, their daughter, Mavis the "helper," and their son Paul, who arrives later at the scene. Christopher kills them all in quite a heinous manner, chopping them with a machete and cutting their genitalia with a jagged bottle. Vivid and disturbing, viscerally disruptive in its graphic details, this narrative instance must be contextualized in terms of history, ideology, and form. In doing so, it is helpful to recall that during the politically fraught historical time period during which *No Telephone* is set, incidents of violence that crossed social class lines escalated. However, rather than engaging the socioeconomic and political circumstances that helped to produce such

aggressive interventions, the public discourse surrounding such violent eruptions invariably reified the very rigid social class structure (*Keep those ruffians in their place*) that helped to produce them.

Fusing politics together with a forcible critique of color/classism, Cliff intervenes in, envisions, and produces a revisionary resistant history to Jamaica's violent History. Resistance is narratively imagined then through ironic, reflexive, revelations from Mas' Charles's son, Paul H. Undoubtedly, the reader is viscerally moved, at first by the graphic and violent nature of the bloody scene. In swift succession, though, the focus is shifted and the reader is taken down a note, forced to recognize the relationship between the violence enacted and the ethnocentric attitudes of the privileged Paul H., through whose eyes the scene is first narrated.

Upon finding his family's lifeless bodies, Paul H.'s principal thought concerns cleaning up "the mess" of blood, and broken, mutilated, and ravaged bodies and pressing into service one deemed appropriate for such endeavors, Christopher, the "yard-boy." The now-dead Mavis, the woman who had cooked his meals, washed his clothes, and overseen his entire domestic sphere yet whose surname and origins he, by his own admission, does not know, is to him merely an "inconvenience" (29). Paul H.'s indifference toward Mavis mirrors exactly the "casual relationship" Christopher is described as having toward others. Surely Christopher's extrapolative recognition that his death would inconvenience no one unless "him dead on dem property" (44) is affirmed by Paul H.'s annoyance toward the presence of Mavis's dead body. Christopher kills Paul H. shortly thereafter. In a society in which human relations are thwarted by class and color, can one wonder at the lack of regard for human life reflected by this gruesome scene? Dehumanization breeds dehumanization.

But, as with any efficacious counterhegemonic narrative, there are (at least) two competing versions of the story. Paul H.'s version, metonymically a tale of class and color privilege, starkly juxtaposes Cliff's subsequent depiction of the death scene. The narrative moment begins thus:

> He asked his grandmother's forgiveness. "Be quick of hand, mi son. Be quick of hand." She spoke to him. He let go. A force passed through him. He had no past. He had no future. He was phosphorous. Light-bearing . . . He was the carrier of fire. He was the black light that rises from bone ash. The firelight passed through his feet and hands, and his blade quivered with its ignited fury . . . They didn't ask to be spared.

> They didn't beg the fire-carrier to save them. The hard god. The lord of the cutting edge. (47)

In this alternative, resistant version, Christopher is the syncretic avenger of the poor and dispossessed. On the one hand he embodies Shàngò, the African orisha, the god of moral vengeance pictured with the double ax; in this case he wields a machete and a bottle. On the other hand, he personifies Ogùn, the god of war, "the lord of the cutting edge." He also embodies the Christian "Messiah" of the second coming, of the apocalypse: "Whose baby was you, lickle Christ-bearer? Whose lickle baby was you? NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN . . . They must turn the damn thing upside down. Fight fire with fire. Burn . . . Cyaan tu'n back now. Capture the I in I. Then say Bless me Jah/Shàngò/Yemanjà/Jehovah/Oshun/Jesus/Nanny/Marcus/Oshun. I am about to kill one of your creatures. Some of your children" (50).

As a child, Christopher is given a likeness of the black, humpbacked "Lickle Jesus" by Brother Josephus, a self-appointed religious leader in the impoverished community of Dungle. After revealing his name, "Christopher," he is symbolically anointed by Brother Josephus, who concomitantly invokes Christ, Christophine, and Christophe in the sacred incantation (38–39). Besides the obvious weight of the comparison to Christ, who historically symbolizes powerful opposition to the hierarchical-, religious-, and class-based formations of traditional Judaism, the allusions to Christophine, the commanding obeah-woman who embodies resistance to and subversion of European cultural domination in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Henri Christophe, who, deeply rooted in his African ancestry, fought for Haitian liberation in Haiti's successful War of Independence against enslavement and colonization, all combine to create a powerful narrative of counterhegemonic and spiritual resistance to subjugation. That Brother Josephus anoints Christopher in this revolutionary tradition unequivocally provides an alternative framework through which to read Christopher's acts of violence.

Thus, Cliff creates two coterminously viable, oppositional historical narratives of resistance. The first situates the historically dispossessed within a context: a name, a history, a culture, values, family. In her restorative, revisionary reconfiguration of Jamaican society, Christopher has a context. This self-same narrative also reveals the critical disjuncture between

publicly sanctioned discourse (symbolized by Mas' Charles and family) and the private and hidden tales of marginalization and invisibility (represented by the residents of Dungle). Finally, this narrative unveils and reveals the prejudices and unspoken discriminatory attitudes that are hidden beneath a veneer of bourgeois respectability and cosmopolitan sophistication (embodied by Paul H.).

The second vital resistant history, however, is not always overtly available to and readily identified by those that most need it. The dispossessed can speak and act against their dispossession, but the broader historical and cultural context framing such contraventions is not nearly so accessible or easily operationalized in a climate dominated by Euro-American discursive and epistemological formations. This alternative, resistant, revisionary discourse concerns the historical propensity of dexterously innovative African Atlantic subjects to draw upon or invoke syncretic religious sign-systems to authorize their actions, gain endurance and strength during hardship, and provide hermeneutical tools to glean meaning, purpose, and understanding from everyday life.

Because of the specific histories of African New World peoples, namely enslavement and colonization, many of the transmogrified gods originally from the various West African pantheons were invoked and their aspects adapted and tailored to fit the specificities of African Atlantic life. For instance, "the politicizing of religious cosmologies," according to Paget Henry, "gave greater visibility and power to the gods of war and strength. Here the appeal was to gods like Shango and Ogun for the strength to fight enslavers and colonizers" (158). In other words, times of warfare call for warrior gods.

Divine aspects of Ogùn and Shàngò are clearly apparent in and invoked by Christopher's act of vengeance, though they are perhaps not intrinsic to Christopher himself. Ogùn, who is the god of war and iron, is commonly referred to as "the lord of the cutting edge," an appellative Cliff ascribes specifically to Christopher in her aforementioned rewriting of the death scene. But it is Shàngò who is primarily operative here; it is he who is the thunder god and whose symbol, the *oshe*, is a double ax (represented by Christopher's machete and bottle) that functions, according to Robert Farris Thompson, as "a promise of moral vengeance" (87).

Shàngò "became an eternal moral presence, rumbling in the clouds, outraged by impure human acts, targeting the homes of adulterers, liars

and thieves for destruction. 'He dances in the courtyard of the impertinent,' as composers of his praise-poetry envision his transformation of lightning into moral action" (Thompson 85). Such moral action embodied by Shàngò is also foundational in the Jewish and Christian messianic traditions. Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with references that link God's moral judgment to images of fire, whether cleansing (as with the aftermath of Noah's Flood or the discourse surrounding the descent of the Holy Ghost) or retributive (as in the language of the Apocalypse). Hence, the subsequent invocation of "spirits" at the end of this deeply moving Christopher chapter, "Then say Bless me Jah/Shàngò/Yemanjà/Jehovah/Oshun/Jesus/Nanny/Marcus/Oshun," serves to authorize Christopher's actions and situate them strikingly within a revolutionary history of resistance to oppression that has historical roots in both "sanctioned" and marginalized ecclesiastical traditions.

Throughout the "blood-spilling/avenging angel" chapter, however, readers cannot, or perhaps should not, lose sight of what is signally at stake. Dispossessed, poor, displaced, orphaned, and black, Christopher needs a piece of land: "His family, the people of his grandmother, work for the family of Mas' Charles long time now. Not too much to ask fe a lickle parcel fe him grandmother? He convinced himself he wouldn't be refused. And yet he had nothing to base his conviction on—except it seemed fair to him" (45). In this way, *both* resistant histories intersect in critical ways, for one cannot read the import of Christopher's retributive power without understanding fully the class/color hierarchies that historically and contemporarily frame issues like the distribution of wealth, including property ownership. Politico-economic and mythopoetic conjoin in mutually reinforcing ways. It is here that readers once again witness Cliff's recursion to materiality.

At the same time, although Cliff utilizes Christopher as a conduit through which spiritual vengeance and moral judgment might be meted out, there are devastating consequences for *all involved*. Christopher slowly descends into madness. By implication, Cliff's text asks us to engage fully the psychological consequences of Christopher's invisibility within a society whose neocolonial structures help to produce the "nervous conditions" that result finally, as the narrative progresses, in his descent into complete dissociation and madness. Surely Christopher is Fanon's quintessential "native" subject suffering from the aftermath of his act of "revolution"

against Mas' Charles and family, who are a metonym for the institutionalized values of a society that renders him and *his kind* invisible.[9] Most significantly, Christopher's devolution into insanity is primarily actuated by virtue of institutionally imposed ignorance. Christopher lacks the cultural knowledge (the literacy of historical African Atlantic resistance) through which to read the significance of his revolutionary act. In the absence of alternative epistemological models in which Christopher might ground his experiences, the only discourse available to him is steeped in binary oppositions and Western valuations: "Had he been an iron-worker like the god. Had he been intimate with this ancient god. The mongering god. Had the young man Christopher suspected the power of Ogùn in him . . . He was convinced of his evil. That his act came from nowhere but his rhyging [innately bad] soul" (177).[10]

Unable to be fully transformative in the thematic realm, or even in terms of African Atlantic culturally inflected mythologies of heroism and radical social movement, Christopher's story, his actions, and their consequences are powerfully disruptive and unsettling. Such disruptions are precisely metonymic with and discursively yoked to Cliff's desire to (re)produce the resistant histories of African Atlantic peoples. Thus it is the *hidden texts* embedded in the narrative of Christopher's life that, once excavated, resist the circumscribing dictates of genre and by extension dominant ideology; their structural counterhegemony is far more radically resistant than perhaps Christopher's actual characterological possibilities permit him to be. So it is, then, that the articulately hermeneutical form of the narration imagines and achieves what Christopher ultimately cannot.

Thus by the end of Christopher's journey, readers recur finally to the politico-economic fabric of Cliff's narration, where we must grapple with and unpack the devastating and destructive impulses underlying "received versions of history" and dominant Discourses, simultaneously bearing witness to the freedom to be gained by doing the difficult work of unearthing and piecing together the multiple, competitive, irreconcilable, and mutually reinforcing histories of African Atlantic resistance. Hidden just beneath the surface of the quilted discursive model Cliff employs is a writerly praxis that is grounded in shared ideological assumptions regarding the value of access, enfranchisement, fairness, and justice. This is where our "literacy of African Atlantic resistance" becomes necessary. Unlike Christopher, whose disenfranchisement, dispossession, and dehumanization bar access to such

hermeneutical apparatus, readers, who are enfranchised, are fitted with the tools to negotiate the spaces between reading and apprehension, between knowledge and knowing, between art and praxis. The interstices where reading is metonymic with a chosen political consciousness are imbued with the power to radically transform readerly frustration into action.

"Cyaan live split. Not in this world."

If readers must wield their literacy of African Atlantic resistance dialectically to engage the viscerally disruptive contours and currents of Christopher's journey, Clare's is an excursion that fully disrupts conventional narratology. Readerly expectations regarding postcolonial subjectivity, ego/consciousness formation, and the traditional bildungsroman are effectually disrupted. For instance, Cliff reverses a conventional feature of many postcolonial literary texts: Clare's journey reverses the migration process.

No "pleasures of exile" frame Clare's North American and British experiences, and she returns to Jamaica after receiving a letter from her sagacious, politically conscious, activist, and transgender friend Harry/Harriet: "The time will come for both of us to choose for we will have to make a choice. Cast our lot. Cyaan live split, not in this world" (131). Harry/Harriet's admonition forecasts his eventual choice to live as a woman. In a similar vein, Clare will choose to return to Jamaica to *claim an identity she was taught to despise*.[11] The phenotypically white, Jamaican-born Clare ultimately resists reveling in her exoticized, postcolonial exilic status; she resists the allure of antiessentialist transnationality and returns as a citizen to her nation-state to participate actively in the nation-building process.

Cliff's circular formal structure is emblematized via Clare's reverse migration from Jamaica to New York to London and then back to Jamaica. Additionally, the conventionally linear, teleological construction of subject formation is also spherical in Cliff's narratological construction, for we are introduced to Clare at the very beginning of the novel, *after* she has appeared to "resolve" her crisis of "ego/consciousness." In fact, what is revealed from the narrative's onset is that both "the daughter of landowners" (Clare) and a woman, a nurse named "Harriet," are dressed in camouflage, armed and riding alongside a diverse group of fellow "freedom fighters,"

whose skin color and class position vary widely (4–7). Thus Cliff's narratological structure commences with Clare and Harry/Harriet having *already* rejected the option to "live split." Self-reflexively disruptive of the conventional bildungsroman, Clare and Harry/Harriet both possess characterological integrity right from the beginning.[12]

Neither is the narrative generically retrospective. *No Telephone to Heaven* does not begin at the end and then trace the resolution of the protagonist's ego/consciousness during some climatic moment which is already revealed at the novel's onset. This narratological departure from convention is significant in terms of its resistance to the tendency to prioritize individual subject formation. That Clare is unnamed at this early pivotal point of the narrative, at the very moment during which (we later discover) she is as fully formed as her characterological development allows, radically redefines the imaginative reconstruction of ego/consciousness formation. Thus, Clare's resolution of her identity crisis, her choice to *not live split*—even if in a postmodern sense such "wholeness" is only a functional fiction of the self—is claimed for strategic politico-economic purposes.[13] Who Clare is and how and why she has come to be formed is necessarily subordinated to the planned act of resistance in concert with her fellow countrymen and women. Her name is subordinated to their collective action.

In fact, it is not until almost half of the novel is complete that the narrative definitively affirms the identity of the revolutionary "daughter of landowners" described in chapter 1:

> The thirty-six-year-old woman Clare Savage is standing in the back of a truck climbing through the Cockpit County. Her story is a long one. How she came to be here . . . There are many bits and pieces to her, for she is composed of fragments. In this journey, she hopes, is her restoration. She has traveled far. Courted escape. Stopped and started. Some of the details of her travels may pass through her mind as she stands in the back of this truck—NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. She may interrupt her memory to concentrate on the instant, on the immediate and terrible need. (87)

The depiction of Clare's fragmented ego/consciousness and her psychological/spatial journeys are as much pedagogical manifesto as revelation. Readers are implicitly tasked with suspending their metanarratological desires. The narrative reveals that the urgency of the "immediate and terrible" materially inflected demands of the "instant," though admittedly

discomfiting, weighs more heavily than the production of a coherent, neat, and comforting narrative. Thus, the references to stopping and starting, the interruptions of memory, the bits and pieces, the fragments, all describe quite precisely Cliff's deployed, ideologically inflected, revisionary, disruptive narrative form.

"Memory crosses memory crosses memory" (92), in Clare's recapitulations—the behest is that we read the complex web of associations in terms that transcend mere poststructuralist signification. Consequently, literately engaged readers are attuned to the intersecting operations of race, power, class, nation, oppression, identity and resistance. The quilted mnemonic pattern that emerges in this chapter weaves together Clare's secret national mission, her sexual history, her father's internalized racism, her mother's abandonment of her, and a growing awareness of racism and of her own privilege in terms of color and class, and ultimately charts her emerging national consciousness. Passage after passage, readers are tasked with quilting together the "bits and pieces" of Clare's memory to configure their mnemonic pattern. Her recollection of her mother's last letter to her, which she simultaneously invokes and interprets, provides precisely such pedagogic instruction: " 'I hope you will someday make something of yourself, and someday help your people.' A reminder, daughter—never forget who your people are. Your responsibilities lie beyond me, beyond yourself. *There is a space between who you are and who you will become. Fill it*" (103, emphasis mine). Like Clare, readers are charged with filling in the spaces, the fissures, the gaps in narration, to actively apprehend the space between reading and praxis—provided, of course, that we are courageously willing to fill in the gaps.

But What about the Gunfire?

Ultimately, Clare's participation upon her return to Jamaica in the planned guerilla counterinsurgency signals that hers and Jamaica's journeys exist in tandem. She must revolutionize both her self and her country. In other words, it is not enough to simply return home; upon returning she must question, *what now*? Toward the end of the narrative, during an extensive conversation with a fellow freedom-fighter (presumably Winnie Mandela), Clare's commitment to engaging in revolutionary action is queried:

It is easy to feel I do not own any of this . . . [Clare speaking]

You have recently returned to your homeland . . . And what have you done with your time?

. . . I have been teaching . . . I returned to this island to mend . . . to bury . . . my mother . . . I could live no longer in borrowed countries on borrowed time . . .

What history do you bring to your students?

The history of their . . . our homeland.

. . . Do you love these children?

Yes.

Would you kill for them?

. . . I told you, you can use the land. I have given this a lot of thought.

You realize you could be held accountable.

. . . Yes I do.

You are certain then?

My mother told me to help my people. At the moment this is the closest I can come. (196)

The staccato movement from "their" to "our" to "my" suggests a clear if equivocal movement toward claiming an identity, an identity in which the mythopoetic and politico-economic are potentially coterminous. Although the form of the narration with its use of ellipses, halting, and equivocation is meant to embody Clare's hesitation, even while reading this section readers already know that Clare is on that bus.

Thus, we must fill in the gaps between her prior irresolution and her subsequent action. We must gather up the fragments of meaning we have gleaned heretofore, "bits and pieces" that are vested with an inescapable politico-economic urgency in order to complete her story. The reader who wields such literacy is fitted with the tools to "fill in the spaces" concerning Clare's ideological journey. In this instance, to fill in the spaces necessitates full immersion in the *literacy of African Atlantic resistance*, which, in this case, resurrects the historic resistance of the Jamaican Maroons to British colonialism. We know that the counterinsurgency is headed for Cockpit country, Maroon country.[14] What may not be so readily apparent is that in the annals of Jamaican history, Cockpit country (like Haiti) stands as a historical symbol of black resistance to white domination, of African resistance to European domination—a site symbolizing and testifying to

survival within and resistance to what was arguably the most repressive enterprise of modern times, Trans-Atlantic enslavement.

Clare and her comrades are headed to Cockpit country to obstruct the filming of an American-funded and -directed film that plans to debase that history and make mockery of Nanny, the "magnanimous warrior" of Jamaican history, a famed Maroon leader and the country's only female national hero.[15] Nanny was renowned for being a brilliant military strategist, a healer, and a potent symbol of black power. In death as in life, her name is unequivocally synonymous with the spirit of resistance. She is Shàngò and Ogùn embodied in female form, functioning as they do as a "warrior god" and invoked, as they are, during times of "war."

Traditionally absented from historiographies of black revolutionary struggle, Nanny serves as a critical exception not solely of black women's involvement in armed resistance but also of their inclusion in the discourse of black heroic liberation.[16] In a Jamaica riddled with global and national crises; textured by classism, color discrimination, and lack of regard for human life, especially that of mothers; with little reverence for the ancient, magical, and revolutionary power of black women; and where the iconic Nanny would be commodified by film, there is much to be resisted.

As a consequence, Clare and her comrades are armed with weapons—and they are poised to prevent this corruption, commodification, and debasement of Nanny's—metonymically Jamaica's—history. But they are betrayed and the guerilla forces are sprayed with machine gunfire from the Jamaican army. Clare is killed:

> O je t'adore, O je t'adore, O je t'adore
> Poor-me-one, poor-me-one, poor-me-one
> Tres-tontos-son, tres-tontos-son, tres-tontos-son
> Kitty-woo, kitty-woo, kitty-woo
> Whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip-whip
> Back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw, back-raw
> She remembered language
> Then it was gone
> Cutacoo, cutacoo, cutacoo
> . . . kut ktu ktu kut ktu ktu
> cwa cwa cwa cwaah cwaah cwaah
> Day broke. (208)

She dies a martyr fighting for a just cause, and in the mythopoetics of postcolonial discourse such a resolution is a triumphant one. Clare, who laments being "educated in several tongues" (106) but being unable to speak the forgotten "Coromantee" language spoken by the Maroons, "remembers language" in the moment of her death. As Belinda Edmondson relevantly points out, "The novel ends with a burst of sounds—English, patois, bird sounds—which signify the unharnessed possibilities of discourse: the power to name, signify, create. These remain embedded in the landscape, future potential to reclaim representation" (190).

But what, we may ask, happens to the immediate needs and material incumbencies in this pivotal moment? In her essay "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character," Cliff says the following: "At the end of *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare Savage has cast her lot, quietly, somewhat tentatively, but definitely. She ends her life burned into the landscape of Jamaica . . . In her death she has complete identification with her homeland; soon she will be indistinguishable from the ground" (265). She continues, "Clare Savage is burned into the landscape of Jamaica, by gunfire, but she is also enveloped in the deep green hills and the delicate intimacy of birdsong" (266).

But, we must ask, what about the gunfire? What about that home beyond the land into which she is sprayed with gunfire and dies? With what does she ultimately identify? What about her comrades? What about the army? What about the one who has betrayed the revolutionaries? What about her nation? But *what about the gunfire*?

Inasmuch as Cliff wants to affirm the heroic moment of martyrdom—and indeed it is, perhaps, mythopoetically celebratory, resolute, and poignant—such *momentary* unification of postcolonial subjectivity and nation is, at best, a pyrrhic achievement. In a text that so powerfully, comprehensively, and discursively quilts together the mythopoetic and the politico-economic, insisting upon their dialectical engagement, the literately engaged reader of Cliff's revolutionary prose must interrogate such a seemingly limited and limiting reading, even if it is ascribed by the author herself.

Just before Clare's ego/consciousness transformation is fully effectuated, ahead of her linguistic recollection, and just prior to her being burned into the landscape, readers are perhaps struck by the repetition of the phrase "back-raw." Symbolic of the raw back, beaten raw under the whip of slavery, "back-raw" is also homonymic with "backra," the meaning of which

Cliff gives us in her glossary appending the novel: "backra: white; white-identified. Probably from the West African *mbakara*, he who surrounds or governs. Some Jamaicans believe the word derives from back-raw, the condition of a slave's back after whipping" (209). "Backra" is not only a term used to describe white or white-identified people; it is also, more significantly, a term used to describe the white power structure.

That the guerillas have resisted is undoubtedly true. That their resistance has ultimately failed to bring about tangible social transformation (at least in the space of the text's imaginary) is at best troubling, at worst, deeply depressing, particularly since Cliff's is a narrative of African Atlantic resistance as well as a resistant narrative. Clare dies by gunfire, but what about the gunfire?

Clare dies as a consequence of cowardice, capitulation, and betrayal. In the end, readers are left with the material, historical, and politico-economic hegemony of the backra system, whose principal power lies in its ability to reify itself. This is, perhaps, where the gunfire inescapably and materially signifies. Thus, the material significance of the ending of the novel is not, in my own purview, best understood in the final moments of the text in which Clare's ego/consciousness is perhaps fully transformed. Rather, the writerly recursion to materiality is best fostered by the narrative's depiction of a conversation between the American producer/directors of the Nanny film—the making of which is really the *dramatis loci* of *No Telephone*:

> "About the army . . . there isn't any danger, is there? I mean they are offering the army strictly to us as . . ."
>
> "No, I don't think so . . . Jamaicans will do anything for a buck . . . Look around you . . . the hotels . . . the private resorts where you have to get an invite . . . the reggae festivals for white kids . . . I don't think they know from revolution. That brief shit with Manley was the exception. Oh the poor followed him; the poor occasionally protest about prices, shortages, that kind of thing . . . Anyway babe, about your fear, about revolution . . . the class system wouldn't permit." (203)

In the end, readers are left, finally, with the issue of class. What ultimately signifies is the reification of the nation's inherent values, which perpetuate class/color hierarchies and maintain an entrenched social class structure that benefits a privileged few. In the end, it is the materiality of privilege and rights that signals the death knell to revolutionary class consciousness.

That Cliff is unable to imagine a resolution for the country of Clare's character appears far more relevant (albeit troubling) a narrative focus than is her penultimate symbolic achievement of wholeness.

If Cliff is unable to imagine resolution for the nation in terms of her imaginative portraitures, I would argue that the *form* of the text is the site within which such possibility is in fact theorized or operationalized. Simon Gikandi convincingly argues that "Cliff finds discursive value in the very fragmentation that other commentators have seen as the curse of West Indian history . . . Cliff posits narrative as a process in which history has value not because of its teleological claims, but because of its discontinuity, its concern with blanks, ruptures, and interruptions" (234).

Àshe

The form of Cliff's text is radically disruptive, is revolutionary, is destabilizing; the form does not capitulate to generic requisites. Gikandi's attribution of Cliff's discursive subversion of "institutionalized history" to postmodernist experimentation warrants further discussion. Arguing that her use of the "well-known techniques of postmodernism—temporal fragmentation, parody, intertextuality and repetition" (23) is a recent phenomenon in Caribbean writing, Gikandi situates Cliff's narratological choices in a primarily Western theoretical frame. But, as I have already suggested, the tug of West Africa and her African Atlantic theoretical, philosophical, and discursive transmogrifications enable us to locate Cliff's narratological disruptions within an alternative, equally efficacious, and culturally inflected epistemological framework. Certainly this is not "either/or" but "both/and" . . . and then some.

In the preface to her collection of poetry and prose, *The Land of Look Behind* (1985), Cliff reveals that her challenge as an author writing from a "culture of colonialism" is a struggle to "get wholeness from fragmentation while working within fragmentation, producing work which may find its strength in its depiction of fragmentation, through form as well as content" (15). Such symbiosis between wholeness, fragmentation, content, and form is fully emblematized by Cliff's narratological constructions. In essence, her description of her literary project in *The Land of Look Behind*

(and I would add her entire oeuvre), namely *to get wholeness from fragmentation, while working within fragmentation*, recalls precisely the revolutionary potential inherent in employing a quilted structure of narration that purposely and self-consciously disrupts conventional, linear, phallocentric form.

As Cliff quilts together fragments of meaning, pieces of history, and bits of language; as she weaves together prose, poetry, shifts in narration, time, space, and voice, and Platform English and Jamaican "nation language"; and as she disrupts conventional narratology in *No Telephone to Heaven*, she is unequivocally invoking the power of àshe. For it is precisely in keeping with the transformative power of àshe that the politico-economic efficacy of employing a quilted structure of narration in *No Telephone* is made manifest. Form is Ideology. Ideology is Form. Cliff makes this clear.

The concluding work in her treatise on race, ideology, history and form, *The Land of Look Behind* provides precisely such clarity. The final piece in her collection is a poem paying homage to Oshun titled "I-tie-all-my-people-together." Oshun is the Yoruba goddess of love, who along with Legba/Eshu, was brought across the Middle Passage to the African New World: "Oshun makes of her people one," the narrator begins, "*mistress of àshe, of full predictive power*" (117). Because Oshun is known for her love of artistry, Cliff's invocation of the mistress of àshe, imbued with the power to tie together all of the fragments, vests Oshun with a transformative quilting power.

The power of àshe lies in its transcendent ability to cross the borders and boundaries of fixed constructs regarding, knowledge, interpretation, and apprehension as well as the formal structures framing such hermeneutical engagement. The revolutionary power of àshe to transcend the discursive hegemony of Western epistemology and its attendant aesthetic constructs opens upon readerly suspension of the desire for the Grand Narrative. In the African Atlantic context, however, to break free from Western master narratives is to unearth the àshe that is always already there—"both/and" and then some.

Aesthetic value lies specifically in such dexterous elasticity—shades again of the African Atlantic limbo-dancing, blues-singing, signifying-resisting subject. This is a powerful tool for one engaged in envisioning new paradigms governing black subjectivity and community, a powerful

tool for one seeking "to get wholeness from fragmentation" to "make of her people one," a powerful tool for one engaged in imagining liberation from oppressive ideologies and the Discourses attenuating color, class, and form.

Although Cliff calls upon Oshun in "I-tie-all-of-my-people-together" to perform precisely such talismanic unification, she does so under the auspices of Legba, whom she does not name but invokes in her inscription of "the old man" who carries a "walking staff" (118).[17] Legba, who stands for the discursive principle, facilitates the necessary act of divination for the achievement of unity. Thus, if Oshun wields her power to unite, Legba wields his power to mediate, to reveal, to guide the African Atlantic subject through the process of interpretation toward knowledge and apprehension.

Cliff's self-conscious evocation of New World African philosophy throughout her writing (fictional/autobiographical/prosaic/poetic) suggests that her symbolic acts of narration are grounded within a conceptual sign-system that clearly understands one, that the highest achievement of artistic expression transcends circumscribing aesthetic principles; and two, that African Atlantic artistic expression is always already imbricated within, working both in and around "networks of power" to which it need not self-reflexively respond.

Hence, "the Caribbean sensibility" is, as J. Michael Dash remarks, "not simply a matter of deploying Caliban's militant idiom against Prospero's signifying authority. It is, perhaps, a matter of demonstrating the opacity and inexhaustibility of a world that resists systematic construction or transcendent meaning" (335).[18] To produce art simply in response to historically entrenched power structures like colonialism and slavery is to produce an aesthetic form that is already bounded. As the sign of African Atlantic artistic and aesthetic production, àshe, on the other hand, is grounded in the achievement of tangible transformation—the-power-to-make-things-happen. There is agency here. How then can one resist deploying "systematic construction" or the promise of "transcendent meaning" in narrative, a form that is conventionally bounded by such ideological prescriptions and at the same time retains sociopolitical efficacy?

The àshe of the text, the power-to-make-things-happen, in the final analysis is vested in *what we do* with the recognition that the materially

manifest oppressive operations of race, class, and color have as devastating consequences as the "institutionalized histories" and epistemological formations that help to keep them firmly in place. Cliff's formal innovations become in the end the palette from which she paints revolutionary possibility . . . if, of course, we are prepared to engage in revolutionary acts of reading. It is the form of the narration that redeems, for me at least, the efficacy of Cliff's narrative as a tool for powerfully interrogating questions of race, history, imagination, and of course, the nation.

A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.
—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Jazz has been from the beginning a cry from the heart of the hurt man, the lonely one . . . But its significance comes not from this alone, but from its collective blare of protest and its affirmation of the life and rhythm of the group . . . The individual, it says, still has his place within the whole . . . So the trumpet calls, the ensemble answers, comforts, screams out its tight collective protest against the (white) withholding world.
—Kamau Brathwaite, "Jazz and the West Indian Novel"

"I will buy the land to build my own house on, Boss."
. . . And Carabon, the heart of magnanimity as if he was talking to an equal, although he must have known full well that with the pay Dixon was getting it would take him another generation to buy the land, said, "Yes, yes, yes. When you ready just come to me."
—Earl Lovelace, *Salt*

4 Jazz Imaginings of the Nation-State
Earl Lovelace's Salt

Populations living within *real* borders and boundaries of their respective nation-states constitute a body politic who must daily deal with politico-economic challenges of development and the realities of unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and violence, as well as the creation of jobs, fair and accessible housing, healthcare, political strategy, economic growth, and aesthetic and cultural development. Practical problems and necessities of everyday life are frequently and often remain amenable to the protocols of "nation."

It is indeed the case that there are many African Atlantic peoples for whom the nation continues to be relevant, efficacious, and vital to the construction of societies in which subjects can actually live their lives in a state of decency, permanence, and fairness. Migration is not so enchanting or desirable for large populations throughout the Caribbean who remain

actively and voluntaristically engaged in the exercise of building their respective nations. Thus, Jennifer Rahim's claim that "it may be the case that when the proverbial dust settles on current ideological romances with travel, translocations, identities in-between spaces of dwelling, displacement and so on, the literature of the nation will prove itself alive and well" (5) is both sagacious and perhaps prophetic.

For many, the state as nation or nation-in-becoming must deal with its state-of-being. In this dialectical configuration, the past invariably *bleeds* into the present. The colonial power, though no longer functioning as state arbiter, bequeaths enduring remnants, durable historical legacies of colonial subjugation, as well as collective anticolonial resistance. The creation of a cohesive nation-state despite the challenging residuals of colonization is complicated further by the racial/ethnic, social, cultural contexts within which these historical legacies are produced, disseminated, and sustained.

For instance, unlike the racial demographic in Jamaica, which is 90.9 percent black, 1.3 percent East Indian, and 0.2 percent white, with the remainder of the population being mixed race and Chinese, Trinidad's racial and ethnic makeup is currently 40.3 percent East Indian, 39.5 percent black, 0.6 percent white, with the remaining populations comprising Chinese and mixed-race groups.[1] Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians comprise almost one half each of the country's population. As a consequence, discourses around race, nation, history, and, of course, culture are marked by both overt and tacit claims of origin and belonging that frequently collide along racial/ethnic lines.

In his many novels, including the much-acclaimed *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979) and *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982), Trinidadian author Earl Lovelace crafts enduring characters, all of whom wrestle with the challenges of national development, challenges made greater by lasting remnants bequeathed by the legacies of colonialism and the historic disenfranchisement of blacks. His novels always interrogate the citizens' responsibilities to engage in meaningful social movement in the face of such national racial diversities. Lovelace's novel *Salt* (1996) energetically pursues and extends these earlier literary projects.

In a speech delivered in the Bahamas in 1998 titled "A Caribbean Place for the Caribbean Artist," Lovelace situates the challenges of nation-building and his own role as a national writer navigating these murky waters definitively within the history of colonialism and its aftermath: "I do

not know how we have become a nation but I know we have not overcome colonialism. Perhaps colonialism is not something to be overcome but to be fought in all its incarnations, and nationhood is not something to be achieved but something to strive for constantly" (qtd. in Aiyejina 159). The drive toward nationhood, fighting always against the ways in which residuals of colonialism weigh heavily upon the constitution of nationhood, is the principal thematic concern of *Salt*.

In *Salt*, the efficacy of nation-building is a foregone conclusion even as the challenges thwarting such assemblage are foregrounded. *Salt* is deeply engaged in imagining the struggle to define and claim an inclusive socioeconomic and political structure in the diverse nation that is Trinidad and Tobago.[2] Lovelace's imaginative portraitures signal his attempts discursively to negotiate the remnants of slavery, colonialism, emancipation, indenture, independence, and postindependence within the contemporary postcolonial space. His negotiations are formally realized through narratology.

Principally, the novel's self-conscious decentering of the traditionally privileged epistemological status of the *narrating subject* and its alternative positing of a shared discourse of narrating subjects enable an embodiment of multiple subjectivities. I want to claim here, then, that the centrality of *Salt* in relation to the nation-building project lies in its formal structure, what I term Lovelace's "democratization of narration." *Salt* offers readers generative material for imagining a democratic Caribbean nation-state—a project whose scope extends across and is germane to the entire African Atlantic.[3]

By "democratization," I am not referring to democratization as constitutional process or to the process by which democratization serves the interests of those with greater access to resources. I refer specifically to aspects of democracy that relate to the pursuit and achievement of social justice and equity. As with *No Telephone to Heaven*, the disruptive narrative structure of *Salt* becomes a metonym for the exercise of imagining nation. Lovelace's novel also leaves off without resolving the dilemmas and conundrums of the politico-economic frame with which it is concerned, which in the instance of *Salt* revolve around reparations for African enslavement and its aftermath.

If, as I have argued in the previous chapter, there is in Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* a recursion to materiality that foregrounds lack of access to

resources and social class mobility for blacks and an attendant color/class stratified social structure, in *Salt* Lovelace recurs quite pointedly to the materiality of black landownership (the very issue around which Christopher in *No Telephone* commits murder and the very reason why the privileged Clare is able to help the guerrillas, for she has inherited her grandmother's land). The historic relationship of Afro-Trinidadians to land ownership is a contentious one, specifically as a function and result of the particularized histories of African and Indian Trinidadians in this regard. Because the British Crown developed unequal land policies toward these two groups, one formerly enslaved, the other indentured, the resultant confluence and conflicts of discourses surrounding race, ethnicity, class, and culture inhere in the issues of property rights.

Land

The British Crown's differing policies toward black and Indian ownership of land had nothing to do with ideological notions of racial hierarchy or ethnic preference in favor of Indians. Indians were generally viewed in much the same way as Africans as being uncivilized, uncultivated, ignorant, and (from the colonizers' perspective) bereft of the domesticating and civilizing benefits of New World enslavement. Landownership policies were strictly an economic matter. African freedom and Indian indenture emerged at specific historical moments, each of which demanded strategic and distinct policies toward property ownership and thus inaugurated a kind of de facto ethnic privilege that had nothing to do with British enlightenment.

The following excerpt is from a memorandum outlining the official policy of the British Government concerning strategies for handling the issue of black landownership in Trinidad in the face of the impending emancipation of enslaved Africans and the Crown's trepidation regarding labor and sugar production in its wake:

> The great problem to be solved in drawing up any plan for the emancipation of the Slaves in our colonies, *is to devise some mode of inducing them* when relieved from the fear of the Driver and his whip, to undergo the regular and continuous labour which is indispensable in carrying on

> the production of Sugar . . . *I think it would be greatly for the real happiness of the Negroes themselves, if the facility of acquiring land could be so far restrained as to prevent them, on the abolition of slavery, from abandoning their habits of regular industry* . . . Accordingly, *it is to the imposition of a considerable tax upon land* that I chiefly look for the means of enabling the planter to continue his business when emancipation shall have taken place . . . (Memorandum from Lord Howick, Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, December 1832, cited in Williams 86, emphasis mine)

The planter class believed dissuading freed Africans from small farming might keep them on the plantations. How do you keep freed Africans who have suffered relentlessly under the yoke of plantation culture from throwing off the residuals of enslavement *en masse*? How do you prevent full-scale migration of labor from plantations? How do you ensure the viability of your most precious export, sugar? You make private black landownership nearly impossible.

In 1841, under pressure from the planter class, who objected to land being sold in forty-acre allotments, the Trinidad Council of Government argued that the smallest acreage available for sale should be 320 acres (Williams 87). Taxation and land allotment requirements provided mechanisms through which black small farming was, at least, prohibitive. However, even prohibitions and excessive taxation did not forestall the labor shortage that faced planters in 1838, the end of the period during which enslaved Africans were granted full legal status as free British subjects.

An economic convulsion, engendered by a shrinking labor force, faced the planters in the postemancipation period between 1838 and 1917. The recalcitrance of freed African labor, black migration, and liberalization of the sugar market led to the importation of immigrants from another labor pool: India.[4] In 1844, the governments of Trinidad and British Guiana began their recruitment of immigrants from India. The first group of Indian indentured laborers appeared on Trinidad's shores in 1845. From enslavement to indenture, however, the conditions of servitude remained ostensibly unchanging. Living conditions were inadequate, wages were pitiable, disease was epidemic, work conditions were deplorable, and the sexual exploitation of women was rampant.[5]

But there were two signal differences between Indian indenture and African enslavement: Indians "chose" to migrate, while Africans were cap-

tured, sold, transported, and enslaved against their will.[6] Also, Indian laborers' contracts were written with a clause that permitted their return home at the end of the indenture period. Financial costs for both recruitment and the laborers' free passage home were borne by the Trinidadian citizens (Williams 99). Naturally, many Indians exercised their right to return home. In fact, according to noted historian Eric Williams, by 1924 "of [the] 383,000 Indians introduced into both colonies [Trinidad and British Guiana] 95,173" had returned home. During some years, "for every four immigrants" who migrated to the West Indies, "five free passages had to be found" to return to India those migrant laborers who desired to go home (Williams 119). There developed a new social and economic query vis-à-vis the Trinidadian labor supply. How can indentured laborers, nostalgic for "home," working under deplorable conditions including the imminent threat of the jailhouse, be induced to remain in the Caribbean? How can the British polity inaugurate their shift from transience to permanence? The answer was *land ownership*.

Thus it was that ownership for the purposes of small farming was granted to the Indian indentured laborer. Land that had been tilled, planted, harvested, and cultivated by enslaved Africans became a lure and reward for new Indian indentured labor. Thus, African labor suffered a second dispossession from agrarian means of production and subsistence. First deported from an African homeland without recompense or apology, they were now deprived of and saw ownership of West Indian land they had perforce called "home" conferred upon others. It is to this historical legacy of black disenfranchisement of land and lack of compensation for enslavement that Lovelace pays homage in *Salt*.

Narratology

In *Salt*, the unobtrusive, unnamed first-person narrator guides us through the textual unfolding. At unannounced moments, though, other characters, both male and female and issuing from the text's represented racial groups, disrupt the narrative flow and seize control; textual form then becomes a metonym for the multiracial, multiethnic space wherein the narrative action is situated. Shifts in time, person, and place texture the narrative. Quotation marks identifying various speaking subjects disappear without

warning, and memories of past events disrupt the narrative linearity, while at other times they unfold gradually, slowly, and in pieces, their import gleaned by us as we do the work of assembling skeins of meaning. No group exclusively owns, controls, or possesses the discursive foreground of Lovelace's novel.

Within West African cosmological and philosophical notions of orality, stories always belong to a varied community. The concept of fixed, inscribed, unchanging, individual stories charting the experiences of protagonists who achieve self-actualization by the narrative's end is largely a Western construct.[7] African *griots*, though they are singular narrating subjects, construct their tales not as owners but merely as mediums through whom the language, knowledge, and ideology of their communities pass. Their stories work to embody a collective consciousness. In like manner, the paradigmatic structures of *Salt* strive to reflect a space comprised of sometimes competitive, sometimes mutual, sometimes ethnocentric, and sometimes collective community testimonials. The novel works griotically to set in motion and performance a polyphonic discourse of national imagining with its readers. Its characters' stories are marked by heterogeneity and collectivity. Such hybridity in combination with homogeneity, Lovelace seems to imply, is fundamental to the creation of a compelling discourse of national belonging.[8]

In *Salt*, the narrative schema metaphorizes a formal structural shift from hegemonic singularity to shared, exchanged, and ultimately democratized discursive performance. Lovelace's narrator must, I think, be metonymically read as a Legba figure, standing at the crossroads of discourses, facilitating the tales that his agency helps engender:

> I look to see what kind of danger Uncle Bango brought with him into our front yard on those Saturdays, but there was nothing I could identify as threatening . . . All I could see separating him from my uncles was this story that he was ever willing to tell. So it has to be his story.
>
> "Watch the landscape of this island," he began with the self-assured conviction that my mother couldn't stand in him. "And you know that they coulda never hold people here surrendered to unfreedom." The sky, the sea, every green leaf and tangle vines sing freedom . . . (4–5)

Lovelace's narrative, in this exemplary instance, gently cues readers to be sophisticatedly wary of Bango's tale. His story, as the mother's caution

and aversion reveal, poses a threat to solacing tales of homogeneity and hegemony. It is noteworthy that Bango elides the narration from our narrator, becoming the principal speaking subject. Though disruptive in the readerly sense, it is a seamless, irreflexive speakerly transition.

Not uncharacteristically in terms of Lovelace's narratological project, Bango's "story" is not completely revealed until some eight chapters later. As god of the signpost, sending messages, clues, and signs for mortals to divine, Legba oversees "the process of interpretation" (Gates 39). Thus from the beginning readers are cautioned and solicited to anticipate and interpret a different type of storied revelation. Bango's story, a tale of betrayal, deception, and unfulfilled dreams attending Trinidadian Emancipation and Independence, is not simple or without resistive import. It is a narrative of refusal and a studied rejection of a "surrender to unfreedom." Significantly, Bango is temporally the first to smoothly segue his text of ethnic meanings into the narrative of the nation.

The narrative structure and thematic deployment of ethnohistorical discourses in *Salt* span cross-temporal contact points. Narrative weight is proportionally accorded (though not equally) to Afro-Trinidadian, Indo-Trinidadian, and Anglo-Trinidadian perspectives. Because they amend, qualify, enrich, and expand one another, these perspectives are not fixities. Thus grand narratives—in their essentialist linearity—are counter forms to *Salt*. Lovelace, by his own declaration, is self-consciously committed to combating all of colonialism's "incarnations." As a consequence, the narratological frame of *Salt* counters imperatives of colonial Discourse at every turn.

Lovelace's novel is achronological, multinarrated, and ateleological. *Salt* democratizes what was once a colonized, impoverishing, brutally oversimplified story of the nation. Does "democratization" imply that each ethnohistorical perspective is accorded equal space or balanced textual representation? No. Every community participant does not begin speaking from the same place. All performance and exegetes are not articulated equitably. We know and are familiar with the hunter's glories, but as the famous African proverb reminds us: hunters have had their historians; lions historically have not.[9]

Still, Lovelace's *Salt* has indeed been critiqued for "privileging . . . one racial group's history," namely that of Afro-Trinidadians, set in a context of "multicultural" nationhood (Meek 293). While there may be inequity

of narrative space, however, there is seldom in *Salt* an ethnocentric eradication of narrative perspective and participation. But for the moment, I would like to begin by discussing the signal ways in which Lovelace begins, treating the symbolically charged myth of the flying Africans—a trope that is specifically borne from African diasporic experience.

Salt opens with the story of Guinea John, who has flown back to Africa from the New World to escape being hung for alleged insurrection. This lore of the flying Africans is attractive because it stands as a celebration of resistance to enslavement and has been made signally popular in recent years by celebrated African American authors like Toni Morrison. Milkman, the main character in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), centers the flying African myth when he discovers that his paternal ancestor Solomon could fly: "That motherfucker could fly! . . . Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay . . . No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit . . . Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew" (328). Despite Milkman's joyous recollection, he soon realizes that knowledge complements celebration. He must arduously learn and absorb the uncelebrated and alternative histories of those left behind, eloquent tales of his ancestors' kin. Lovelace's narrative begins with a similarly mythic evocation of African flight:

> Guinea John, with his black jacket on and a price of two hundred pounds sterling on his head, made his way to the East Coast, mounted the cliff at Manzanilla, put two corn cobs under his armpits and flew away to Africa, taking with him the mysteries of levitation and flight and leaving the rest of his family mourning over his selfishness, everybody putting in their mouth and saying, "You see! You see! That is why Black people children doomed to suffer: their own parents refuse to pass on the knowledge that they know to them. (3)

Although Guinea John returns to his daughter TiTi in a dream, hence restoring his good name, he does not pass on the mysteries of flight to her. Instead, he instructs TiTi that she and her descendants must live so their "living . . . would make him an ancestor" (3). For Lovelace, as for Morrison, the lore of "New World African flight" must be understood within a context of long centuries and ancestral fathomings and not merely as a valedictory story of African subversion.

Magical flight is not an end-in-itself; it is an invitation to metaphor, complex figurations of African Atlantic subjectivity. The flight of Guinea John does not offer a stable and unified discourse that narrowly defines black subjectivity. Rather, the myth links, bridges, and negotiates among discourses of black liberation and oppression, flight and entrapment, past and present. Guinea John's originary flight is a thick discursive precursor of *Salt*'s explorations of contemporary flights, migrations from the Trinidadian home space to study abroad. George Lamming, Merle Hodge, Samuel Selvon, and Jamaica Kincaid share thematically and creatively in the thematic foregrounded by Lovelace. All of these authors' works depict the "gifted native," whose self-imposed exile to the United Kingdom or the United States is ambivalently cast as a "figure-in-flight." The "flight" abroad affirms the hegemony of Western epistemology, and yet unequivocally promises (in the space of the narrative at least) an *access* that is both social and material. Flight has its rewards.

Salt acknowledges the allure of flight. However, the "gifted subject" of Lovelace's text, Alford George, resists the pull endorsed by Guinea John. Lovelace's antiflight interlocutor asserts: "Failure was not to escape" in "a system that gave all of its rewards, put all of its prestige towards training a few students for escape" (76). A refusal to fly can be an ironically revolutionary resolve. "Not to escape," not to flee, Lovelace suggests, is to stay, work out, and imagine New World formations of epistemology, existence, community, and storytelling that demand African Atlantic innovative modes of articulation. "Their future," Guinea John asserts, "would be in the islands" (3).

Lovelace's destabilization of the primacy of the narrating subject envisages what can be called a "future without flight." When, at the novel's beginning, Guinea John is narrated, the story appears to be told by Bango, the principal narrator's uncle, a descendant of Guinea John. At the same time, this narrator may also be complexly telling *Bango's story* telling *Guinea John's story*. The speaker's identity is indeterminate, a fact that reinforces the principle of communal testimonial. We are also told that "this was one of the beginnings of the story that Uncle Bango sat down that year to tell" (3–4). In other words, in the context of black modes of orality, the order, meaning, form, and implicitly the speaker shift, change, and transpose, depending upon the site from which the narrative is enunciated.

The autochthonous myth of the flying Africans and its treatment in *Salt* launches us into postmodern indeterminacy. But it does so in what can only be termed an autochthonous "mode of articulation," one that subverts the dichotomizing imperatives traditionally affiliated with all forms of New World African "flight," mythologized or institutionalized. Such complex writerly negotiations of black subjectivity must be arduously grappled with if there is to be liberation from the strictures of sanctioned discourses.

Reparation

The freedom and flexibility of the narrative form of *Salt* are paralleled by the thematic recurrence of the term/concept "freedom." Here, theme and form converge in Lovelace's imaginary. In Lovelace's purview, gaining freedom is markedly different from achieving liberty, and so freedom in terms of my own usage assumes an inextricability between *freedom* and democracy—that which Lovelace calls "liberty." Freedom, says the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "is contextually bound and limited by situational contingencies . . . the exercise of freedom may be considered authentic or inauthentic according to the choices made . . . Authenticity consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibility and the risks it involves, in accepting it in pride and humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate" (90–91).

In the public discourse of the nation-state, the attainment of "freedom" is symbolized by and inherent first in the abolition of slavery and subsequently via declaration of Independence. Such *freedom moments* are construed as *real*—meaningful markers within national historical discourse. For Lovelace, however, redemptive historical narratives as these construct and constitute a "false sense of freedom."[10] For it is only in the moments directly beyond Abolition/Independence's *first* instance that citizens within the nation-state in fact ground their freedom in the exercise of rights and responsibilities as liberated subjects.

In *Salt*, freedom is exercised, situated, and contextually bound, therefore, within the framework of the text's speaking subjects. For example, the novel also begins with Bango's description of the landscape, which serves as a metaphor for the Trinidadian subjects who are engaged in an exercise of and for freedom: " 'Watch the landscape of this island' . . . 'And you know

that they coulda never hold people here surrendered to unfreedom.' The sky, the sea, every green leaf and tangle of vines sing freedom . . . Things here have their own mind . . . There was no natural subservience here. Nobody didn't just bow down to nobody just so" (5–6).

Bango emerges from a paternal history of opposition to colonialism. Kin to Guinea John, who flew back to Africa, he is also allied to JoJo, Guinea John's grandson, who lodged a formal complaint against the Queen for giving him a "half-way freedom" upon Emancipation Day. A "half-way freedom" is the articulated and protested equivalent of Lovelace's "first moment" of freedom and is equally as "false." For his protest at a "half-way freedom," JoJo suffers a public flogging.[11]

Bango inherits a tradition of resistance that he promulgates by organizing a group of boys, dressed in red berets and khaki uniforms and holding wooden guns, to march uninvited at the first Independence Day parade. He organizes a march every year thereafter, each march symbolizing the hopes and dreams for full participation, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or conditions of servitude and indenture, in Trinidadian society. The narrative reveals that the upcoming Independence Day celebration will include Bango's yearly ritual.

The story of Bango's parade of resistance, his public acknowledgement of having received a "half-way" independence, exists within a synchronized or concurrent temporality alongside Guinea John's soaring tale of resisting enslavement and JoJo's demarche against a "half-way freedom." Thus *Salt's* cross-temporal thematic exists in Great Time—temporally and spatially fluid, expansively absorbing time into "into a reality that is neither after nor before" (Mbiti 22). Great Time also serves as a structuring agent of the novel and culturally contextualizes the achronological, ateleological (or telescopic, if you will) unfolding of the narrative. By placing Bango's, Guinea John's, and Jo-Jo's narratives of resistance in tandem and moving fluidly between them through Great Time, Lovelace creates a powerful counterhistorical narrative of black opposition to social and institutional disenfranchisement—a counterhistorical narrative that is marked by its structural heterogeneity.

Emancipation, post-Emancipation, indenture, postindenture, Independence, Black Power, and post-Independence all come to exist in a network of meanings that is synergistic. It is a network where, for example, the post-Independence moment has as much to say about the post-Emancipation

moment as it does about developing nations' grappling with contemporary challenges of globalization. Moments of the past are invoked not only because they shed light on the present, but also because the past is in fact a *living presence*, consistently impacting apprehension of and engagement with "reality." The enactment of stories in *Salt* becomes the aegis under which this Great Time cross-temporality is imbued with hermeneutical power.

Much of *Salt's* textual action, however, is dramatized around the Afro-Trinidadian character Alford George, a gradual hero who does not usher from an activist genealogical line like Bango and who comes only slowly to a liberatory vision for Trinidad.[12] When Alford is about to be replaced in government after having served three years and facilitating no substantive societal change, Bango contacts him to request that Alford offer the "Feature Address" at the annual Independence Day march. At this juncture then Alford must decide what his speech will discuss.

At first, he envisages the speech as an opportunity to retain his political position. Later, after talking to Bango's wife Miss Myrtle, he changes his mind. Through "Miss Myrtle's story," Alford learns that the real impetus fueling Bango's yearly march is to remind the community that Independence, like Emancipation, had not secured the enfranchisement of the black Trinidadian community. Hence, Alford recognizes that the occasion can provide an opportunity to truly unify and democratize his country by advocating "concrete efforts to elevate those who had been disadvantaged by history" (162). He then decides that he will call for land reparation in his speech.

Alford, along with his three political "allies" (Adolphe Carabon, an Anglo-Trinidadian landowner; Sonan Lochan, an Indo-Trinidadian business owner and county council member; and Ethelbert Tannis, an Afro-Trinidadian political strategist whose allegiances lie with the Prime Minister) confer on the feasibility of giving land to Bango as a gesture of recognition for the wrongs committed against black people in the "half-way freedom" beginnings of the nation. The other members of the multiethnic coalition want to give Bango the land quietly. During Bango's lifetime he has refused to buy land of his own accord. Bango's refusal is read by the community as evidence of his insanity, at best, his laziness. Through Myrtle's narration we come to realize that Bango will never buy land; rather, he would like to "make the land witness to his undefeat" (155).

In other words, the act of buying land comes to symbolize for Bango accession to the salvific Discourse of the British Emancipation project.

It is Bango who adamantly refuses to accept Alford's offer unless the land is given publicly as an unmistakable symbol acknowledging the historical disenfranchisement of Afro-Trinidadians: " 'This was never just about land . . . If they give me the land they must do it openly. In front of everybody. People must know why they giving land to me. It must be public'" (164). Although Myrtle wrestles with Bango's decision, it is she who brings the narrative full circle when she insists that Bango articulate, that he speak the impetus for the marches, that he say definitively what has been the history of "blackpeople" in Trinidad, and why, given that history, the land reparation must serve as a beacon.

Controlling the narrative enactment at this point, Myrtle assumes the first-person narration:

> "You begin plenty times to tell me" . . . "You talk about Guinea John your great-great-great grandfather and about his grandson JoJo and about the others, but you never finish the story. To this day you never tell me why you marching this march every year."
>
> He take a deep breath. "Watch the landscape of this island," he began . . . "No," I say . . . "Don't tell me . . . tell the man who want to give us the land, why he must give it openly. Tell it to Alford George." (164–65)

Bango begins to explain the "why" to Myrtle: he says, " 'Watch the landscape of the island,'" the very words with which the novel begins. Here Legba intervenes to remind us that this is the story *with which we must now grapple*. Here now, finally, is the key to our understanding. Here is our hermeneutic link.

Alford, after hearing JoJo's story from Bango, the story of gradual freedom, the six-to-eight-year time span that Africans had to wait for emancipation to go into effect during what is commonly referred to as "the Apprenticeship period," the adage that "Emancipation must be the work of time" (191), that "Emancipation was not going to free them" (177), insists *finally* that the land must be given openly. Alford's commitment to reparation for black disenfranchisement is bolstered further by the revelation that the British Crown compensated the enslavers and not the enslaved: "More than one million pounds compensation and not a penny

for the Blackpeople they had under sufferation" (191).[13] Twenty million pounds in total in fact were paid by the British Crown to the former slave owners throughout the British colonies.

It is at this juncture in the narrative, after being symbolically transported into the dialectical Great Time space of communal testimonial that Bango/JoJo's narration engenders, that Alford fully seizes control of the narration for the first time. Alford's "coming to voice" in the text as agent and not actor, as participant and not merely character, in this exercise of nation-building imaginings resounds as follows:

> He had invoked JoJo; but I suspected that what he had just told me could have been his very own story. Things had not changed all that much. *Bango had lived again his great-grandfather's story* . . . I felt strangely elated and strangely humbled. *It was my turn now, my turn*. I had not failed to see that the Colonial government, Britain, the authorities, however we called them, had had opportunities to make restitution and apology that would restore value and dignity and respect to our community and people. Each time they had backed away, out of fear, out of arrogance. The sadness was that the National Party had done no better. (188, emphasis mine)

This moment of Alford's participation in the discursive enactment of the narrative stands as a pivotal point that marks a "turning of tale." His recognition that it is his "turn now" is, of course, doubly reflexive. It is literally his turn to take a stand through engaging in action, thus publicly acknowledging black disenfranchisement in the speech he will give; also, within the symbolic realm of the text, it is his turn to set in action, through narration, the course for the dramatic unfolding of the novel's principal project. That project is imagining and creating a unified Trinidad marked by democratic ideals. For his stance on the land reparation matter Alford is rebuffed by his party leader and is unsure what Anglo-Trinidadian, Indo-Trinidadian, and Afro-Trinidadian support he will receive at the "March past." The narrative movement, then, measuredly builds to a climax as the Independence Day parade approaches.

Lovelace's ultimate goal of articulating and imagining a unified and democratic Trinidad is, according to one commentator, "undercut . . . with an Afro-Trinidadian bias" that is apparent in the novel's general portrayal of Indians and whites, not blacks, as *racially divisive* and via its privileging

of Afro-Trinidadian history as the vehicle through which the "multicultural" Trinidad arrives at a vision of national unity (Meek 273–93). What this critique overlooks, however, is that the philosophical, epistemological frame of *Salt* rests precisely upon the notion that Afro-Trinidadian history *is* inextricable from the history of the nation and the histories of all of Trinidad's multicultural, multiethnic citizens. In other words, Indian and white Trinidadian history is simultaneously black Trinidadian history and vice versa. Thus, the vision of a "peaceful multicultural nation" can only be actualized, the narrative insists, when the entire nation seriously claims and fully engages its own history of black enslavement and the ensuing absence of either apology or recompense. The cardinal question is this: how can the nation "authentically" engage the horrors of African enslavement while at the same time constructing a necessary discourse of national belonging? Sartre reminds us that "authenticity consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibility and the risks it involves, in accepting it in pride and humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate" (90–91). Form and theme must thus become coterminous in their ideological compunction toward freedom.

"This Island's Mine by Sycorax, My Mother"

Speechmaking is at the center of Lovelace's *Salt*. The book's oratory is distinguished by and distinguishable through an established dialogic relationship between content, context, and speaker. As a consequence, *Salt's* narratological disruptions of chronology, its shifts in time and place, and its democratization of narration are all yoked to the narrative's prioritization of oral, public discourse.[14]

During a private meeting of the multiracial coalition regarding their upcoming plans to introduce citizens to its vision for the future, the question of who is best suited to give the welcome address at the first public event becomes the subject of great deliberation:

> "Everybody feel he is a victim. African, Indian, European, everybody feel wronged by everybody else . . . The trouble . . . is that we are all strangers. What we need is someone to make the others welcome."

> "Who will be the welcomer? The Amerindians welcomed Columbus. They are not here now to welcome anyone . . . Who here has the authority to welcome anyone? Who can say, come in, you're welcome?" (93, 102)

The centrality of "the welcome" is in Lovelace's purview far more than a hospitable nicety, ritual, or rhetorical play. Lovelace vests the "welcome" with the discursive potency around which one might begin the process of building an egalitarian society. He articulates his ideological position in a speech titled "Welcoming Each Other," given during a 1998 lecture hosted by the Inter-American Development Bank, one of the principal lending agencies that funds projects to promote economic and social development for Latin America and the Caribbean.

In his speech, Lovelace suggests that the prevalence of racially/culturally inflected tensions pose serious impediments to national development. Intercultural/ethnic/racial frictions, according to Lovelace, "place each group on the defensive; and limit the quality of the creative address we might make to our future." By way of remedy, Lovelace continues, "we need to find a way to welcome each other into a New World of new, liberating, and creative relationships." In Lovelace's purview, such creative address, encapsulated in the act of welcoming a New World configuration, rests upon reparation: "Reparation is not just for the victim . . . it's also for the person who inflicted the wound, and for the bystanders. We must deal with the indignities of the past if we are to move forward" (qtd. in Sankar 38–44). Lovelace thus concludes:

> In order to welcome others, we need to be guided by the idea that power must uphold, protect and affirm what it is to be human. Our humanity is not negotiable . . . We need to pursue the full restoration of personhood for both the brutalised and the brutaliser, those who have been injured and those who in injuring others have injured themselves . . . Being human also means saying you are sorry, and doing whatever it takes to restore the relationship you violated. (qtd. in Aiyejina 167–72)

Critics might argue that Lovelace's idea of "the welcome," which he clearly believes is best issued by those who have been made most unwelcome in the New World, namely persons of African origin, is epistemologically essentialist, reductive, and nativist. These are the traditional labels attributed to any discourse linked to primacy claims. A welcome assumes

what I might call a "differentiated subjective locationality." In other words, there are the welcomers and the welcomed. A welcome does not presuppose that everyone present is positioned equally in terms of his/her belongingness; at the same time the welcome does not preclude the achievement of belongingness at some point.

The assumption, though, underlying such conventional logic is that whites and Indians in Lovelace's paradigm are the proverbial "strangers at home" and blacks the belonging natives. Alford (as I later show) falls prey to such conventional wisdom. This interpretation of his definition of "the welcome" is salient if one views Lovelace's perspective through the lens of race.[15] But Lovelace's paradigm, I would argue, is imbricated as well in a discourse of political economy and yoked directly to the central issue of economic enfranchisement. Within this context, blacks are the least among the "belonging natives," as they own considerably less of the homeland in which they now live.

We might do well to recall that in the end neither Sycorax's originary nor Caliban's birthright claims truly take effect in *The Tempest*. Lovelace implies the inefficacy of such claims in the aforementioned "Welcoming Each Other" speech: "While [Africans] have done much to place the need for a new world squarely on the table, they have not managed so far to equip themselves with the means to liberate themselves, and so genuinely make others welcome. One of the reasons for this is what I alluded to earlier: Emancipation, self-government, and Independence never delivered liberation to them" (167). If the New World is in fact a place of arrivals, who should be the one to make the welcome? What kind of "creative address" might ultimately be transformative in the exercise of nation-building?

Lovelace's treatment of "the welcome" in *Salt* is ideologically and philosophically commensurate with his articulation of its centrality in the aforementioned speech. In the world of *Salt*, Florence, our narrator's aunt and Alford's domestic partner, brings Bango to the attention of the political group and recommends that he be asked to give the welcome.[16] The response of the multiracial coalition to her suggestion is revelatory. Each member of the group retrospectively recalls his childhood encounter with Bango's march from his own ethnocentric, self-interested perspective. Polyphonous and multiperspectival, all get a chance to publicly speak, to weave their ethnohistorical frustrations intricately into their narratives of

national longings and belongings. Such is the democratized narratology of Lovelace's *Salt*.

Lochan recalls "standing as a boy in front of his grandfather's hardware store" and experiencing simultaneous feelings of attraction and exclusion discursively yoked to the island's history of African/Indian ethnic differentiation and the perception of blacks' primacy claims: "He did not see their poverty. What he saw was something rhythmic and grand from which he and his brother had been excluded." Carabon articulates his sense of isolation from the ritual of national belonging: " 'It frightened me . . . All these Blackpeople marching with the flag as if it belonged to them, as if we had no place here, as if the country belonged to them. We just watched them.' " Alford (as I mentioned earlier) responds defensively as though bearing guilt for Bango's public display of national pride: " 'He was depicting Chinese, Europeans and Indians in his band . . . And you didn't feel that you were welcome . . . What you feel now?' " (104). Finally the coalition reaches a consensus; they decide to bury their initial responses and furnish money to Bango for this year's march as solicitation for his agreement to make the welcome remarks.

Sitting silently until the deliberations are complete and "trying to keep her vexation under control," Florence privately challenges Alford. Upset at the condescending approach the group adopts in order to obtain Bango's agreement, namely an appeasement of "new uniforms and a few sandwiches" for his marchers, Florence proclaims: " 'I don't see how you could value your welcome and put no value on the welcomer.' " If Alford is going to authentically assume the responsibility of nation-building, he realizes finally, he must "find a way to welcome the one [Bango] who we want to welcome everybody" (104–5).

Clarity springs free in the midst of his ruminations, when he happens upon an article from the *Royal Gazette*. Written upon the first anniversary of Emancipation, the article reveals the British Crown's post-Emancipation land settlement policy regarding formerly enslaved Africans. Alford comes to recognize that before there can be *address*, there must be *redress*. Alford's gradually awakening consciousness mirrors quite precisely that of Lovelace's imagined and anticipated readers. Together we discover that the ethical way to uphold, protect, and affirm the integrity of the welcome and the humanity of the welcomer is through public acknowledgment of

and material restitution for past injury (in terms of both the injured and the injuring, who are themselves in turn injured); concomitant with this public acknowledgment is securing a commitment from *all* of its constituents, from all of Trinidad's speaking subjects, to restoring and by extension healing the nation.

Play What Isn't There

It is a familiar expressive critical dictum that for the African Atlantic subject the improvisatory nature of *jazz* captures in its cadences, its form, its straining against Western classical conventions, its creation of a space marked by artistic autonomy and agency, something of the subject's yearning for freedom and democracy. It is within a jazz context then, that I invoke Edward Kamau Brathwaite's essay "Jazz and the West Indian Novel":

> The "jazz novel" in the normal course of things, will hardly be an "epic." Dealing with a specific, clearly-defined, folk-type community, it will try to express the essence of this community *through its form*. It will absorb its rhythms from the people of this community; *and its concern will be with the community as a whole, its characters taking their place in that community*, of which they are felt and seen to be an integral part. The conflicts which give this kind of novel meaning will not be the Faustian conflicts of self-seeking knowledge or the Existentialist stoicism of alienation. (330–31, emphasis mine)

Salt is a jazz novel. While the narratological structure of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone* uses jazz elements, in particular the riff, *Salt* unequivocally embodies what Brathwaite describes to be the *central features* of the jazz novel.[17]

Clearly akin to jazz in structure, in *Salt* the maestro, our narrator, relinquishes control of the narration to the "soloists," to the utterance of myriad cross-inflected tales of existence that emerge from and constitute an entire community. Together, their themes and rhythms "jam" on the viability of achieving racial understanding, political inclusion, and economic enfranchisement. Collectively they *jam* on their discrete relationships to the body politic. Though soloists, they nevertheless are joined in crafting a

coherent score, fusing fragments to national sound. Their collective goal is to glean existential meaning not as solipsistic inquiry, but as phenomenological intersubjective engagement.

In their deliberations, each of the representatives from the three principal racial/ethnic groups takes a *jazz break*—narrating, in solo, their *authenticity* and their commitment to *liberty*, signifying democracy and freedom in new harmonies. Each must decide whether the democratic ideals they profess to know and believe will be enacted through their own direct action. Each stumbles upon *truths* that become ideological constructs upon which a viable democracy might be built. For example, Ethelbert B. Tannis, the Afro-Trinidadian, accedes: "And that was why Alford George was so different. He stumble upon the truth that to free yourself you have to free everybody" (193). However, the paramount question for each is whether he will "assum[e] the responsibilities and the risks involved" in forging new democratic frontiers.

In their respective chapters, not only do Lochan and Carabon *blow solo*, so do, albeit to varying degrees, Myrtle, Tannis, Florence, Bango, and Alford George. In comparison to the aforementioned, however, the sections told from Lochan's and Carabon's perspectives provide no occasion for the characters to speak in the first person, outside of a dialogic structure. But, readers *are* unequivocally invited into the intimate and complex range of emotions and experiences that Lochan's and Carabon's narratives reveal. In a similar vein, our unnamed narrator, who is presumably the audience for Ethelbert Tannis's story, does not function in Lochan's and Carabon's tales as an identifiable interlocutor. But such narratological shifts are perhaps meant to symbolically reveal the limitations and the possibilities of a shared multiethnic discourse.

In the absence of "the welcome," in the absence of redress, there can be polyphonous, perhaps cacophonous, but not necessarily harmonious address. And yet, it is the polyphonous nature of jazz that is its most salient, aesthetically pleasing and architectonically rich feature. As Brathwaite saliently reminds us, in the world of jazz "each performance is different . . . because of its improvisational character; and each successful improvisation is a true creation and is an expression not only of the individual artist . . . but of the *group* of which the artist is a part" (57). Rather than being absent from the dramatic unfoldings articulated in the Carabon and Lochan chapters, the maestro is instead an absent presence. Silent for the

moment, allowing Carabon and Lochan to entirely blow solo, our narrator steps aside so that their respective versions might be given the weight, the import, the sounding they deserve. An effective maestro knows when to chase, when to jam, and when the soloists need a break to blow.[18]

Lochan and Carabon are perhaps best positioned to tell their own stories, even though both of their narratives intersect with Alford and Bango's respective tales of ancestry. Yet through their polyphony, the stories live inside one another, despite their seemingly fragmented modes of revelation. Both Lochan and Carabon become the vehicles through which ancestors tell their own stories; Lochan's grandfather Moon has his own story to tell, as does Carabon's grandfather, the plantation owner for whom JoJo works, and Carabon's father, the man upon whose land Dixon George (Alford's father) now lives. JoJo, Bango and Alford all live inside of Carabon's story as much as he lives inside of theirs. Moon lives inside of his grandson's story as much as he lives inside of Bango's story, the story that Miss Myrtle first begins to tell.

The narrative *breaks* to Adolphe Carabon and a conversation at the Carabon plantation estate, the site at which Guinea John's, JoJo's, Moon's, Dixon George's, Bango's, Alford's, and Sonan's histories coalesce. Multiple harmonies of arrival, land, labor, and national "welcome" always converge at the plantation economies of the New World. Adolphe apprises his family of the land reparation plan that he, Sonan, and Alford have discussed and, in theory, agreed upon. His proposal is met with vehement rejection: "'We not giving them any blasted land. What the hell they take us for? . . . If they want land they could buy it'" (195).

Adolphe's introduction of the land reparation plan transports his father to 1838, when his ancestor, presumably his own father, accepted from JoJo a petition written by "The Memorialists," a group of formerly enslaved Africans seeking restitution for having been economically, physically, and psychologically exploited under the system of Slavery. This petition was to be delivered to the Governor, and JoJo seeks Carabon's support in tendering both the message and its demands.

Readers are first introduced to this historical document in a previous chapter when Bango animates JoJo's story during his audience with Alford George. The exact document, language, and occasion for its existence are replicated in the subsequent chapter, invoked here by Carabon, who speaks of the events as though he himself lived them. Such cross-rhythmic

textuality, the repetition of a prevailing text underneath or underlying an expression of a different order, is a salient feature of *Salt*'s narratology—in particular, its jazz structure. It is also emblematic of the narrative's Great Time spatial-temporality. This chapter in which Carabon's ruminations are depicted is significantly entitled "Adolpe Carabon: The Birthday Party."

Members of the Carabon family are gathered at the plantation to celebrate their father's birthday. A birthday signals chronological time. As a consequence, the appellation "the set-up" intimates that readers should pay close attention to the temporal and spatial shifts that occur during this chapter. When Carabon Sr. begins to narrate, his daughter dramatically declares, " 'He is traveling! He is traveling! . . .' 'He's going back. He's back there in thirty-eight'" (208). Upon first glance, readers will undoubtedly assume that the daughter means he has traveled back to 1938, the only date that makes sense in our Western notions of temporality. Otherwise, he would have to be long dead. But when Carabon Sr. begins to narrate it is clear that our ideas about time, memory, reality and discourse must be suspended: " 'He came, he said, to make a complaint. It was after the episode with Daaga'" (209). Carabon Sr. lives too his ancestor's story.

The historically based Daaga episode to which Carabon refers occurred in 1837. Referenced in not more than a few pages, the episode tasks readers with piecing together the significance of this historical (and ostensibly forgotten) moment. Macandal Daaga, an African chief who had been captured by the Portuguese, was "rescued by the British and baptized into the Christian faith" (*Salt* 183). Drafted into the West India Regiment, a core of black soldiers established to support the British militia and sent to Trinidad, Daaga led a mutiny in Trinidad of about 280 recruits to challenge the white authorities. The plan failed; forty people were killed and Daaga was characterized, according to JoJo, as "a madman leading a set of stupid fellows who, they were happy to report, planned to walk to Africa by way of the sea from the seacoast of Manzanilla" (184), the very site from which Guinea John flies back to Africa.[19]

After the Daaga incident, JoJo reveals in fact that "one year and one month after the Daaga fiasco, the authorities put an official end to Apprenticeship." It is at the end of the apprenticeship period in 1838 that JoJo goes to Carabon expecting that the authorities would "settle accounts with Africans" (184). Carabon recounts the conversation between himself and JoJo in precisely the manner that JoJo begins to narrate earlier in the text. And

the Carabon patriarch who is narrating on his birthday is *indistinguishable* from the Carabon who, some hundred years later, promises Dixon, Alford's father, that he will sell him land once he is ready to purchase it. Readers are thus asked to suspend Western rationalism and engage a radically altered and redefined epistemology.

Rather than articulating racial divisiveness, the Carabons articulate a complex, if misguided, rendering of their plantocratic role. Their collective narrative voice reveals Carabon did in fact float the idea of giving land to JoJo after his request; he received no support, however, from either the white or colored plantocracy. In his own lifetime, Carabon offers Dixon (Alford's father) an opportunity to buy land but he waits for Dixon to ask for it (221). Paternalism, thus, replaces a just humanism. Neither of the Carabon patriarchs are presented as irredeemable racists; but (and this is an important "but") neither assumed the "responsibilities and risks" involved in taking reparative measures for their participation in, endorsement of, and benefit from "that slave past." It is here that Adolphe represents hope.

Adolphe, taken as a "joker" for most of his life, recalls his days of playing football. His "baller status" on the field symbolizes the position he wants to play in the redefinition of his *master status* in the society: "Adolphe looked at the old man at the old ways at the life dying and he thought of the theory that he had held that colonialism was a system of a dying power looking to ensure its life by penetrating another, seeking a host not so much to feast upon but to live in, to carry itself forward" (215). It is through football, however, that Adolphe (playing under the name "Myrrh" given to him by his black and Indian peers) becomes potentially included in the society in which they now live.

Faced with a choice, Adolphe can become "the host," a purveyor of parasitic colonial values that ensure white hegemony and perpetuate white economic control, as his father did for his own father, or he can assume the responsibilities and risks of actively repairing the wrongs committed against black people by his ancestors: " 'I am sorry!' Adolphe shouted. He turned to them. 'There, I said it for you. I say it for all fucking you: I am sorry. I am sorry!' " (215). Juxtaposed against his feelings of alienation from national belonging that he articulates earlier in the text vis-à-vis Bango's marching, on the football field Adolphe experiences something akin to national integration: "Myrrh! That was when he was most needed, when it didn't matter what his colour was or who the fuck was his father, was just

that the team wanted a goal to prevent one from scoring and he was there, the man on spot. Just that. The man on spot. And he did not know that really that was all. That was his whole life right there. Because that was when he had something to die for, people, a team to play for" (198). Adolphe's recognition that he is now the "man on spot" and must act fuels his desire to facilitate the donation of the land. " 'We emancipate them already,' Michael said. 'We ain't have anything more to do.'" Adolphe replies: " 'Except to emancipate ourselves'" (207).

On a similar note, Sonan Lochan solos, polyphonic soundings of Indo-Trinidadian experience. For much of this chapter, under the auspices of Sonan, who inaugurates Moon's story, we travel through Moon's poignant recollections of the exclusion of Indians from the political process since their arrival upon Trinidad's shores, of his campaign to represent the people of Cunaripo/Cascadu, and of the Afro-Trinidadians refusal to vote "Indian." Moon, who owns a store in Cunaripo, campaigns under the slogan: "EVERYBODY COULD MAKE SOMETHING" (223).

On the one hand, Moon's slogan is steeped in the rhetoric of bourgeois individualism, but it also encapsulates the promise represented by Moon's newly acquired nation, a place where he can change his name to that of a Brahmin. For Moon, the New World represents an opportunity to shed the deleterious effects of conventional Hindu caste stratification. However, his arrival in Cascadu is symbolized by elevation in class position that rests upon another form of caste stratification that inheres in the land title he now possesses for "five acres in the Bandon, the land that the government had given him in lieu of his return passage to India" (218). It is, of course, land that is neither available for dispensation nor for purchase by Afro-Trinidadians.

As part of his political campaign, Moon extends credit to customers with the expectation that they will vote for him. Though he wins more votes than his fellow Indo-Trinidadian competitor Gopisingh, Moon's bid for election is unsuccessful. The bitterness and betrayal he feels about "the people who ate his roti and drink his rum and take his things on credit without downpayment and didn't vote for him" (225) eventually kills him. As in the depiction of the Carabon planters, Moon's representation is not steeped in the discourse of racial divisiveness. In fact, Moon articulates a philosophy of racial universality: "All the talk about race, and he would begin to smile . . . because he had begun to notice that his hair was white

and so was Ezekiel McKnight's, and when they cut it short you couldn't tell what was their race . . . He didn't have no conclusion to these observations he just made them and laughed" (225). At his funeral "the whole of Cunaripo and Cascadu gathered" (226). Universalism notwithstanding, although Moon is not (to invoke Lovelace) "the person who inflicted the wound," he is certainly a "bystander" benefiting in landownership and mercantile prospects from the wound's infliction. His inability to articulate a "conclusion" to his observations about race entangles him in the history of a still-to-be-repaired black disenfranchisement.

As with Adolphe, the potential for the creation of a new world within which a multiracial creative address might be conceivable lies with the younger generation. Sonan is imbued with his grandfather's desire to engage in representational politics. After Alford opts to align himself with the National Party rather than continuing to pursue formation of a multiracial party, Sonan's disillusionment leads him to run for and later win a seat on the county council as the Democratic Party representative. In *Salt*, "The National Party" is the fictional counterpart to the black-dominated People's National Movement (PNM), the party that Eric Williams led from 1956 to 1981. Williams served as Trinidad's prime minister from 1962 until his death in 1981. "The Democratic Party," on the other hand, correlates to varying degrees to both the United National Congress (UNC), which had been historically Indo-Trinidadian, and the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), which aimed for a multiracial constituency.[20]

Despite Sonan's tenure with the predominantly Indian Democratic Party, he attempts to resist ethnocentric appropriation: "although he knew he was Democratic Party, he felt he was more" (234). Bissoon, his political advisor, remarks in response to Alford George's land reparation proposal, "'So you want to give the creole and them land? You feel that go make them vote for you? Look, don't let them frighten you. If they give the creole land, they have to give to the Indian . . . This is our time'" (241). Spurred by the possibility of a Democratic Party victory *for the first time in thirty years*, Bissoon views land reparation as an unnecessary act since it appears the party will not need further Afro-Trinidadian support to win.

By way of response, Sonan, a cricketer, invokes the metaphor of sport, as Adolphe does earlier, grounding his ideology in terms of democratic principles: "He talked about his search to find an alternative to the politics of mash-up-ness, of Division . . . He talked of his anxiety over having to

bat just for Hindu School . . . what he had learned from that was that he had to bat for something bigger no matter who he batting for" (234). When asked to speak at a political rally on the cusp of the Democratic Party victory, rather than speaking about "Indian time," Sonan invokes, through Great Time, his deceased mother. She is singing a bhajan song, a sacred Hindu devotional that is sung to generate the devotee's movement toward inner consciousness while simultaneously invoking the divine. The syncopation, the movement, the essence of Sonan's message becomes vested with the bhajan invocation of divine righteousness—a will to speak out of what is right and not out of political expedience.

Sonan thus deploys an ancient Indian ritual to authorize his creative address of new world imaginings. As with the *substitution* in jazz—the play in which another chord is played that replaces an expected chord—Sonan replaces the discourse of ethnic nationalism by speaking an ending to Moon's story, finishing the "the part he had always left out—out of sensitivity—of coming to this place, of finding these creole people, of their misunderstandings, of the need to welcome each other" (243). Unlike Moon, Sonan reaches and articulates a conclusion of teleological connectivity. Sonan, in the end, blows solo with liberation as his theme. Bissoon, we are told, looks on in "horror at *this change of rhythm, this other note"* (243, emphasis mine). Disappointingly, Sonan's words are drained of their potency, for what he is saying becomes "drowned out by the chutney tassa calypso music, coming from the enthusiasm of a people who would not be denied the victory they were scenting for the first time" (243). Ethnic and intensely sounded specificity eclipses a liberatory national sound.

Ethelbert Tannis, Adolphe Carabon, and Sonan Lochan all articulate the ideals of freedom and democracy extrapolated from their ethnocentric and narrowly defined existence: "free everybody"; "emancipate ourselves"; "bat for something bigger." Every jazz ensemble, according to Brathwaite, "hints sometimes at chaos, sometimes at anarchy." "But," he continues, "the chaos is always resolved into order" (58). The question at the close of ideological deliberations remains one of praxis. Will reflection evolve into action? Praxis, of course, is the fundamental principle in the establishment of a truly democratic society. Each of the aforementioned representatives of an emergent Trinidad understands and unequivocally articulates the centrality of social justice and social equity for nation-building, but we are left still wondering whether they will take the "chance" to forge a new

frontier. Will they indeed "sing songs of freedom," like the freedom fighter Bob Marley, like the landscape wherein they navigate democracy—the landscape whose defiant refusal to "surrender to unfreedom" is the soil upon which they now stand?

Can the Dragon Dance?

On January 8, 1992, the "dragon" weathervane that sat at the peak of the Red House, the government's headquarters in Trinidad, was removed and replaced with a white dove. (The old weathervane was believed to be a dragon, even though it was actually a serpent.) The weathervane, which graced the Red House from 1907, was removed by the PNM, the party resuming power from the NAR. As mentioned earlier, the PNM had previously been recurrently elected to power for thirty years, from 1956 to 1986. However, a coalition government of the NAR assumed power from 1986 to 1991. During the NAR's five-year tenure, and after a series of purportedly "strange occurrences" within the society, in 1989, in a Calypso sung by one of the leading calypsonians, "Sugar Aloes," the dragon atop the Red House from which the NAR now governed was invoked as an "evil omen that was harming the country" (Finden-Crofts 161). Aloes was himself a self-declared PNM supporter (Finden-Crofts 161).

The removal of the dragon upon the reascendance of the black-dominated PNM was regarded by many as a capitulation to the discourse of ethnic divisiveness. Despite the fact that the PNM government denied acting out of reactionary political motivations, the removal of the dragon was seen by many as highly suspect, particularly within the context of a society whose political history had been so pervasively marked by racial tensions. In an ironic twist of fate, rather than bolstering their popular appeal, the removal of the dragon from the Red House by the PNM government became a metaphor used by many and varied constituents in the society to critique what they perceived as government mismanagement and corruption.[21]

In a brilliant reversal, a semantic twist, surely a Legba-inspired discursive stroke of genius, Lovelace invokes this historical moment, this blight in Trinidadians' troubled racial history. He reimagines it by creatively addressing and in the process symbolically taking reparative measures on

behalf of the government's capitulation to racial tribalism. Using wit and humor to empty the racially motivated superstitious discourse of its efficacy, Lovelace's *Salt* parodies the events of 1989–1992.

Readers learn of "Mrs. Cassandra Pilgrim," who sees a pigeon flying toward the Red House to pitch on top of the weathervane. In swift succession, the dragon comes alive, grasps the bird in its fangs, and "turn[s] its blood-red eyes threateningly upon her," causing her to grab her rosary and scream while the night watchman and spiritualist "Garth Villafana," the exorcist-in-training, runs to her rescue. The pigeon's head drops at Villafana's and Cassanda Pilgrim's feet:

> When he [Villafana] looked up he saw the dragon on the weather-vane looking away from him—in the direction opposite to how the wind was blowing. With his experience, he knew right away that the dragon was the culprit and that the spiritual wickedness in high places had reached a level that had now put the people of the city at great peril . . . A series of mishaps were taking place all over the island . . . This was clear evidence that the National Party had departed from the ways of righteousness . . . It was the dragon on the weather-vane of the Red House, the seat of government. The Dragon had to be removed . . . The National Party must go. Corruption must stop. (238–39)

In historical accounts of this event, the NAR's governance is linked to the publicly rendered ominous pronouncement; they are the "the evil omen" that must be removed. In the world of *Salt*, however, it is the National Party, implicitly the PNM, that suffers such a fate. Most significantly, what I read as an implicit "apology," a symbolic gesture of creative address that puts in proper context the idiocy of the historical removal of the dragon from the Red House, is rendered in the chapter that addresses Indo-Trinidadian political history. In this chapter, Lovelace writes a revisionist history that is potentially healing through its symbolic intent. His reparative discursive act signifies his "truth and reconciliation" gesture. Forging a unified nation necessitates all parties owning their missteps and denouncing racial divisiveness *tout court*. And yet, the righting and restoration of the historical record is one thing. Imagining a way forward while reconciling the indignities of the past is, quite simply, another story.

Like Ethelbert, Adolphe, and Sonan before him, Alford, in his concluding speech at the Independence march, cries freedom. Address and redress

are inextricable one from the other: " 'How can you free people?' he [Alford] asked. 'When every move you make is to get them to accept conditions of unfreedom, when you use power to twist and corrupt what it is to be human, when you ask people to accept shame as triumph and indignity as progress? What is power if power is too weak to take responsibility to uphold what it is to be human?'" (257). Having "blown solo," Alford is all praxis—he descends from the podium and joins Bango's marchers.

As in jazz, the reader hopes that by the "wrap-up" all will be tightly in harmony. We want soloists to achieve true artistic expression and, metonymically, to stand for the realization of a *common* Trinidadian subjectivity, a manifold array marked by democratic ideals. We want the ensemble to achieve order out of chaos. By the novel's close, however, *Salt* proves unable to deliver such an imagined interracial fusion. There is no melding of voices. But as Brathwaite in his invocation of another jazz aficionado so astutely reminds us, " 'the jazz listener is perpetually faced with an unknown future.' Such is the nature of improvisation" (78). Such are the rewards and risks of engaging in a literately writerly praxis.

The Wrap

At its conclusion, Lovelace's novel gives over again to the unnamed narrator. Our eager readerly expectations and hopes are deflated as we become once more cognizant of the sheer power of "massa's" narrative and the refusal of counterinsurgents to launch *their* attack, repair the historical crimes, and create a new nation. Ethelbert, Adolphe and Sonan are not even imagined into the finale at the Independence Day march. That they even show up is ambiguously cast. Yet the narrator, our maestro, partially restores hope:

> The tragedy of our time is to have lost the ability to feel loss, the inability of power to rise to its responsibility for human decency. As I made my way back to the march, I was far from without hope. *I suppose what I have learned is to not despair because of our errors or to be afraid to try again*. I thought of my Uncle Bango and of Miss Myrtle, of Alford George and the lifetime it had taken him to get here. I was thinking that if what distinguishes us as humans is our stupidity, what might redeem us was our grace. (259, emphasis mine)

Although we want to sing the blues, the narrator asks that we suspend our disappointment. There will be no transcendent conclusion. He asks that we believe that democracy's multivoiced chords might indeed be struck again. We are left with the hope that a day will come when a writer imagines not merely a jazz text, but rather a jazz-fusion text, a work that "tries again" and, ultimately, succeeds in imagining a postcolonial space marked by humanism and grace.

In the end, as literately engaged readers, we must also be maestros. We must suspend our desire for the metanarrative and be generous to soloists, to their competitive and communal testimonials, their movement from linear time to Great Time, their aphasias and aporias, and their circumlocutions as well as their honest realizations. And perhaps it is in the *experience of reading* that we ourselves do viscerally experience democracy. It is along the narratological center that *Salt* achieves its thematic goal.

Democracy—a polyvocal and multirhythmic foundation upon which we assert we wish to build our Caribbean nations—is epitomized in the generosity we accord one another *as we give each other space to speak*. Such space and speech deriving from the minds of *Salt* become a critical repository, as it were, in which to leave and record the process of our "forming." Text and reader, reader and text: *Salt* teaches us to dream and found the nation in steady ways based upon one multivocal foundation and writerly theoretical exemplum. Like building the nation, saving it may well commence and end with our readerly losing-of-ourselves-in-community in order to save ourselves as national subjects.

You can pick up in the playing if you listen hard, listen easy enough, the chorus saying, We are doing this together . . .
—John Edgar Wideman, *Hoop Roots*

Mark my word, it is the contagion of freedom they fear . . . Do not fall asleep in your enemy's dream.
—*The Cattle Killing*

5 Dis-ease, De-formity, and Diaspora

John Edgar Wideman's The Cattle Killing

In his introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 1996*, noted African American author John Edgar Wideman identifies the "special subversive, radically democratic role" that fiction can play not only in terms of transforming readers' ways of *seeing* the world, but, even more powerfully, in tangibly altering readers' ways of *being* in the world. In Wideman's own radically democratic, subversive works, narrators, voices, stories, histories, myths, fantasies, imaginations, and readers are always woven together, ebbing, flowing, and spilling out onto each other's textual bodies and into the body of texts. The rich discursive texture of Wideman's narratological endeavors reflects African Atlantic traditions of storytelling.

Throughout Wideman's oeuvre, storytelling *always* exists in Great Time, bridging past, present, and future and history, memory, and the imagination. "The past," Wideman affirms, "presents itself fluidly, changeably, at least as much a work in progress as the present or future" (*Hoop Roots* 9).

For Wideman, as for Earl Lovelace, Great Time operates as a powerful dimension for healing, salvation, and transformation. The confluence and convergence of spatial-temporality sustains the primacy, grants tenure, and inaugurates the transformational power of stories, whose efficacious articulation is contingent upon collective performance. Meaning—that which is gleaned from the hermeneutical process—is only substantively achieved via active writerly engagement in the conjuring, production, dissemination, and enacting of stories. Like quilting and jazz, the recounting of stories, stories that emerge from a fluid and elemental intersubjectivity, becomes the locus of survival.

In Wideman's purview, the *imagination* is "the pathway to freedom".[1] The imagination is the place where alternatives to the paradigm of race—"the doctrine of immutable difference and inferiority, the eternal positioning of white over black"—posit new formulations of African Atlantic subjectivity (*Fatheralong* xxii). Thus, in Wideman's estimation, the doctrine of racism "can be given the lie by our life stories" (*Fatheralong* xxxi). In other words, the exercise of imagination, engendered by the enactment of storytelling, becomes the mechanism by which the Discourse of race is consummately fissured and replaced with ethical, just, democratized, humanist, empowering discourses.

The question implicit in such faith is this: how *can* the imagination function powerfully to give *the lie* to the *paradigm of race*? How might the imagination provide salvation in the face of Wideman's viscerally disturbing proclamation that "we are in the midst of a second middle passage" (*Fatheralong* xxii). Acknowledging that "race is an essentialist concept or an existential one, depending on the moment," Wideman resists the propensity to relegate race solely to the symbolic realm. Fictional or not in its construction, *race* materializes in the forms of disenfranchisement and exclusion that have historically plagued African Atlantic subjects. The exercise of imagination is, in this context, literally a matter of life and death. What kinds of reconfigurations, reinventions, reconceptualizations of African Atlantic subjectivity might assure African Atlantic survival in the midst of the contemporary horrors that constitute Wideman's "second middle passage"? In its twenty-first-century context (when there are no more slave ships and dungeons), what kinds of dexterous metamorphosing are adept to navigate the confines of the jail cell, the ghetto, and also the

coffin? What kinds of revisionary strategies are equipped to transliterate mere survival into surviving *whole*?

Storytelling

Wideman's eruptive narrative constructions are designed to so discomfit readers that they have no choice but to self-reflexively attend to their desires for linearity, clarity, causality, and coherent meaning. In the final pages of *Fatheralong* is this assertion: "I'M REMEMBERING THINGS IN NO ORDER, WITH NO PLAN" (184). The hegemony of Western linear, cause-and-effect discursive practice is exposed and critiqued. The frustrated reader becomes in this instant an imaginative agent, an anxious talisman toward new identities.

Central to Wideman's conceptualization of the power of the imagination in creating a freeing and freed discourse is deploying a narratological structure that produces synergistic, participatory engagement in coextensive acts of naming and renaming reality, claiming and reclaiming language. In order to "break, displace, replace, the paradigm of race," *stories* (like the past/present in Lovelace) must bleed into one another so that they might breathe life back into the body politic. The body politic, in this instance, becomes both imagined and imagining as "community." Thus, a new African Atlantic subjectivity must be intersubjectively reimagined.

The revolutionary potential of storytelling opens upon Wideman's wish articulated in "Common Ground," where he writes, "The paradigm of race is the antithesis of freedom" (xxiv). Inherent in breaking, displacing, and replacing is, literally, the writerly and anxiously dislocated readerly *rupturing* of the "master narrative." It is only through de-forming form, through creating a narratological structure that is fundamentally, structurally, paradigmatically *free*, that "the lie" can be efficaciously given to "the paradigm of race." By symbolically *erupting* conventional Western metahistoriography, Wideman's texts symbolically "redress" racist historical misrepresentation—Glissant's idea of a single History—conventionally founded upon and steeped in Western epistemologies. To *interrupt* narratology is to productively unsettle the readerly enterprise; to *disrupt* narratology is to self-consciously thwart readerly expectation; to *erupt* narratology is to fully

explode the readerly process. Thus, hope for African Atlantic subjects in the face of the paradigm of race lies in readers' engagement of a radically regenerated narratology.

It is precisely this fundamental belief in the revolutionary potential of discourse (deployed for good and ill) that fuels Wideman's writerly agenda revealed in *The Cattle Killing*. Published in 1996, *The Cattle Killing* recovers from the rubbish heap of history and sets in tandem two devastating historical events, placing them alongside the contemporary genocide of young black males in 1990s urban America: the yellow fever epidemic in eighteenth-century Philadelphia and the Xhosa cattle killing in South Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century. Wideman's treatment of both historical periods is intended not only to excavate the buried, forgotten, and disremembered circumstances surrounding them but also to fundamentally alter the Historiography of historical recounting. Thus Wideman's form is doubly ideologically inflected.

The act of positing alongside one another and ultimately quilting together these simultaneous periods of racialized dis-ease in *The Cattle Killing* is intended to signify a common condition in which "false prophecies" (Wideman's phrase for dominant racist discourses, i.e., the doctrine/paradigm of race) lead black subjects to internalize a self-hatred that results in the destruction and death of black bodies and, quite potentially, the black body politic. The only way to subvert "false prophecies" is to explode their epistemological function and posit in their stead an alternative discursive model to restore black subjects and black subjectivity to health. Wideman's alternative model lies in storytelling.

Fever

At the center of *The Cattle Killing* is a despairing young black woman, Kathryn, who has resigned herself to death. Her life is nourished and literally sustained through the stories told to her by the main protagonist, a formerly enslaved, unnamed itinerant preacher winnowing his way through the ravages of eighteenth-century, plague-ridden Philadelphia.

The yellow fever epidemic began in 1793, and during this time approximately five thousand people died and almost half of the population fled the city. Because it was mistakenly believed that blacks were immune to

the disease, many blacks were pressed into service by members of Philadelphia's African American clergy—principally the Revs. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. Both Jones, leader of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church, and Allen, leader of Bethel Church, were skeptical about the immunity theory but succumbed to pressure from the white medical community, primarily from Dr. Benjamin Rush, whose bleeding and purging method of controlling the fever had gained him added prominence and influence.[2]

In return for their rallying around black volunteerism, Rush promised to lend his financial support and cultural cache to Allen and Jones, who had seceded from the newly segregated St. George's Methodist after being told that the recently built gallery had been constructed for the purposes of maintaining racial separation during worship. Rush led Allen and Jones to believe that if African Americans demonstrated their altruism, showing that blacks were governed by nobler sensibilities and acted out of "brotherhood," then the case for emancipation, or at the very least improved race relations augured by financial support for their respective religious institutions, could be more easily made. However, false prophecies such as Rush's invariably produce false promises.

It is crucial also to remember that this year, 1793, marked the passage of the first Fugitive Slave Law. Both Philadelphian fugitive slaves as well as free persons of color were under threat. The status of African Atlantic subjects in the United States rested precariously on what seemed like sinking sand. As a consequence of several factors, black Philadelphians answered the call for help in great numbers and many took care of white citizens who were sick and dying from the plague of yellow fever.

The immunity theory, however, was without foundation (false prophecy). Some two hundred African Americans perished from the disease. But, as with any period in global history when there existed a health crisis of epidemic proportions, the Discourse of disease was invariably (though not until more recently tacitly) linked to a Discourse of biological difference. One only has to skim current public language surrounding the global AIDS epidemic to confirm this point. So too it went in eighteenth-century Philadelphia.

The popular lore surrounding the disease was that an African slave from the Caribbean had transported it to the United States. However, the public dialogue regarding the recent "epidemic" was imbricated within a

much longer-standing and deeply ingrained discourse of race—a society dis-eased ultimately by the presence of black bodies and their relationship to that presence.[3] The medical establishment's perspectives diverged little from public conceptualization.

There were two schools of medical thought during this period: the "climatists," who believed that yellow fever was created through natural atmospheric factors, and the "contagionists," who attributed the fever to the influx of West Indian slave-revolt refugees. But as Joanna Brooks saliently asserts, despite the obvious ethnic diversity of Philadelphia's black population at that time, "under the broad banner of phenotype, black people appeared to be a group sui generis: domesticated, even American-born, and yet perpetually foreign" (157). Thus, the *sign* of the black body is always already the *sign* of difference.

Black bodies signify disease, contamination, produce dis-ease; black bodies' *difference* from white bodies, a marker justifying slavery, segregation—like a disease, black bodies must be carefully contained, isolated, kept at bay. Blackness is doubly contaminative. Both climatists and contagionists arrived at their theories through unequivocally race-based misassumptions. Both theories, however, coalesced along one point: climatists and contagionists both believed blacks to be innately immune to the fever. *The paradigm of race*.

In *Cattle Killing*, the main protagonist reveals that he learns of the insinuated link between blacks and the yellow fever epidemic "in rapid whispered exchanges with coach drivers and footmen" (34): "We are being blamed in the newspapers. They say we are immune to the fever and require no assistance. They say black slaves, refugees from the troubles in Haiti, brought the fever to these shores. *Mark my word, it is the contagion of freedom they fear*" (34, emphasis mine). It is by no means coincidental that in the eighteenth century, as in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, Haiti and Haitians are continuously invoked in the discourse of race and dis-ease. The War of Independence in Haiti began in 1791, two years before the Philadelphian yellow fever epidemic. Haiti would spend the next thirteen years in a bloody fight against France to secure black liberation. In obtaining its freedom from French rule, finally, in 1804, Haiti would stand for time immemorial, much to the umbrage of the West, as the earliest *historical* symbol of African Atlantic resilience and indomitability against European imperialism.

However, in 1793, the year of the "fever," the institution of slavery in the United States was firmly entrenched. Justification for its continuation, rested upon a Discourse of African biological inferiority and a concomitant "threat" of black contamination through miscegenation. Miscegenation, according to proponents of slavery, would be a natural consequence if in fact blacks were freed from their positions of servility and endowed with citizenship rights. Of course, the fear of miscegenation wore only one face: that of sexual relations between black men and white women. Of course, the reverse (sexual relations between white men and black women) was understood as a feature of the society's social fabric.

Science

Self-consciously situating his revisionist account of the yellow fever epidemic within the Discourse of miscegenation, Wideman purposely depicts two heterosexual, interracial "relationships"—a mutually loving but socially unacceptable one between a black man and a white woman, and a violating and oppressive but socially sanctioned one between a white man and his enslaved black female servant. The narrator, the itinerant preacher, weaves in and out of both stories.

The first, is a secret loving marriage between a white working class English servant known to us as "Mrs. Stubbs," and an African man, "Liam," who had, prior to their migration to the United States, been trained in England and apprenticed to the famous British painter of anatomy and dissection, George Stubbs. The two "borrow" Stubbs's surname when they come to live on the outskirts of Philadelphia in Radnor. According to their ruse, Mrs. Stubbs is George's widow; Liam masquerades as her servant. In the existing raced climate, they are socially alienated. They have no choice but to live in reclusion.

The historical George Stubbs was fascinated by anatomy, in other words, that which lies beneath the skin—important scientific work in the midst of prevalent and widely disseminated pseudoscientific "proof" of African inferiority. Although Stubbs is most renowned for his anatomical portraits of horses, he did dissect and paint a human cadaver, a pregnant woman who in her eighth month of pregnancy had died with the fetus inside her.[4] In Wideman's revisionist account, Stubbs's subject is an African woman

who is auctioned while lying dead and naked on a table to the highest bidder: " 'Purchase one,' " the auctioneer urges, " 'and you own two' " (135). Naturally, Wideman is signifying on the painful historical commodification of enslaved black women's reproductive capacities. Stubbs's scientific conclusion, in the end, unveils the fallacy of biological determinism: " 'I've cut them open," Stubbs proclaims, "unpacked the organs one by one. No difference beneath the skin'" (136).

Stubbs, we know from history, went on to dissect and paint the fetus unearthed from the pregnant woman's body. Liam, who is also an artist like the artist who is author of the text, self-reflexively queries the cost of such painful unearthings and obsessive artistic compunctions: " 'I would not want a world bereft of Stubbs's pictures. But the price. The terrible mad price'" (128). Mrs. Stubbs queries the rationale of Liam's enduring, if momentarily shaken, loyalty to Stubbs: " 'Wonderful drawings you say. Nature revealed you say. The science of anatomy advanced. To what end. Where are the drawings. Who sees them. These doctors who have unmasked nature's secrets, do they treat you or me'" (129). Despite Stubbs's philosophical declaration that there is "no difference beneath the skin," it is Mrs. Stubbs, the white working class woman who returns us to the materiality of the paradigm of race. For Mrs. Stubbs knows that what ultimately signifies in a world whose values are determined by race is Liam's outward black skin and her guilt by association. In the end, the black citizens of Radnor are eventually attacked in a "night of rape and murder and fire" (149). Liam, Mrs. Stubbs, and their man-made sanctuary are burned to the ground, for "the town had not forgotten them. White woman, black man. No" (149).

Bessie

It is also the paradigm of race that creates the circumstances surrounding the second interracial relationship *Cattle Killing* treats, which occurs between the dying black woman, Kathryn, the woman to whom the narrator is telling his stories, and her employer Dr. Thrush, who is Wideman's fictionalized version of the prominent white physician Dr. Rush. Dr. Rush, despite his public antislavery stance, owned a female slave. In Wideman's

version she has a name. Kathryn is repeatedly raped by Dr. Thrush while he believes his sightless wife to be sleeping. Kathryn becomes pregnant, and for this reason, she wills her death. Through his storytelling, the itinerant preacher wills Kathryn's life.

In historical accounts of the yellow fever epidemic it is Dr. Rush who is the greatest proponent of black immunity. A public advocate for decent treatment of blacks, in the novel and in his historical portraitures he represents the quintessential well-intentioned white liberal, a status, seen at the time, as entirely commensurate with his ownership of an enslaved African Atlantic subject. In his depiction of Thrush, Wideman implicitly invokes and recasts Richard Wright's memorable character from *Native Son* (1940), Mr. Dalton. One will no doubt recall that Mr. Dalton is Wright's embodiment of white liberalism: unintentionally condescending toward and at the same time consciously exploitative of disenfranchised African Americans. As in *Native Son*, in *Cattle Killing*, the white male liberal's wife, Mrs. Thrush, is blind, although the historical Mrs. Rush was not. Clearly, blindness, in Wright's as in Wideman's representation, is a double entendre for *blind liberalism*.

Mrs. Thrush turns a blind eye to her husband's betrayal of Bishop Allen, who in return for providing black nurses to tend the sick expects, but does not receive, Thrush's public support against a defamatory account of the epidemic published by a white reporter named Matthew Carey. (Allen and Jones too sought Dr. Rush's public support against Carey. They did not get it.) In his account, Carey depicts the volunteering black healthcare workers as unprincipled extortionists. Naturally, such public statements were highly incendiary, particularly in the midst of a social climate reeling from the aftermath of dis-ease and the recent passage of the Fugitive Slave Law.

The itinerant preacher, our main narrator, goes to the Thrushes' on behalf of Bishop Allen to seek the *good doctor's* support. It is here that he first meets Kathryn. The story of Dr. Thrush's betrayal of the black community, narrated by Mrs. Thrush, written by Kathryn, and interspersed with musings from the main narrator, is a polyphonous, phantasmagoric medley of sexual abuse, betrayal, resistance, acquiescence, violation, and (we hope) survival. Like Liam and Mrs. Stubbs's charred bodies before, Kathryn's raped body powerfully signifies the devastating effects of the paradigm of

race. And yet, juxtaposed against the auctioned body of the dead pregnant African woman, so reminiscent of *Native Son*'s murdered black Bessie—silent, objectified, and displayed in the courtroom as "evidence"—Kathryn is neither dead nor silent.

For Kathryn engages in a radically subversive act of resistance by writing an alternative "her-story," signaled by italics, that symbolically erupts the master narrative constructed by Mrs. Thrush's ethnocentrically charged historiography:

> I suspect his silence on your virtues when he [Thrush] waxes eloquent on the potential of the Negro race indicates how completely he regards you as a member of our family, inseparably one of us . . . —*one of us you say. When there are two will we still be one of you* . . . the servants avoided him . . . *but he did not avoid one of them* . . . the book, the African girl who composed it [Phyllis Wheatley's book of poetry], bring to mind our Kate—who knows what eloquence she might achieve, freed from her constant round of duties—so full of feeling—*so full of his ravenous seed that hollows out a place within me, devouring me from inside—as you from outside—digging, scooping*. (173; 176; 185)

Kathryn's raw interjections *explode* the metahistory. Her radical interventions viscerally erupt from the page. Kathryn, through telling her own story, reclaims the power of discourse. Thus, Wideman's belief in the revolutionary potential of storytelling, to "break, displace, replace" the paradigm of race is reified by and affirmed in Kathryn's resistive feats of herstoriography.

Official, sanctioned History (in the Glissantian sense) is fully unveiled in this section. Mrs. Thrush's ethnocentric, conscripted, circumscribing historical version of what happened during *the year of fever* is given the lie *first* by the discursive disruptions of Allen and the itinerant preacher who tell an alternative and compelling version of deceit, betrayal, ingratitude, and racism, and *second*, and even more powerfully, via the discursive eruptions of Kathryn that expose and literally explode the lies upon which the official History is underpinned. For it is the lies of omission, the lies buried beneath black women's *almost unspeakable* and *almost inaudible* history of rape and violation, that tell the full story. Though buried deeply beneath the discourse of the official record—written in finely printed italics against

the hard and boldly emblazoned print of the History-Makers—a careful and committed excavator of truth will not miss her history.

Prophecy

That Wideman would draw upon the quintessential text in African Atlantic literature that graphically explicates the pathology of racism to construct his imaginative portraitures in *Cattle Killing* is not surprising. If *Native Son*'s "Bigger Thomas" in his pathos and nihilism is the consequent product of living as an African Atlantic subject in a rabidly racist society, Wideman's allusive excavation of Bigger's story is surely a present-day warning of the devastating consequences of the "paradigm of race."

The opening pages of *Cattle Killing* begin by introducing, in random order, the yellow fever epidemic, the Xhosa cattle killing in South Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the contemporary epidemic killings of young black men amongst each other. All are instantiations in which race, violence, fear, disempowerment, and despair coalesce to create the potential for nihilism. Each instance is produced, fostered, and sustained by the powerfully entrenched paradigm of race.

The prologue of *Cattle Killing* is constructed in terms of spatial and temporal movements through Great Time. Great Time is in Wideman's purview the consummate dimension of healing and possibility. The precursory narrator is named "Eye," and it is from his perspective that the prologue is narrated. Eye describes his sojourn in late twentieth-century Pittsburgh, where he is walking up a hill, en route to read from his latest novel to his father. All at once, he is fifteen years old again, sneaking up the *same* hill to attend a house party. Suddenly, the narrative sequence flashes forward to 1990s Pittsburgh again, as "Eye" narrates the events surrounding a recent shooting at a party held on the hill he now traverses: "Last night a black boy fifteen shot in the face and dying. Another black boy a year younger already dead from bullets in the chest. At a party. Perhaps in the basement of one of the row houses where they had those fifteen, twenty-five cent socials" (6). The genocidal deaths of the two young black boys move the narrative backward in time toward the *cattle killing prophecy*.

At the core of this tale is the story of "the cattle killing," the moment in Xhosa history when a woman, a young prophet named Nonquawuse (who turns out to be a false prophet), tells her people that if they want to resist continued European domination, they have to kill their cattle. The cattle had been the life force of their people. Between 1856 and 1857, four hundred thousand cattle were slaughtered. More than forty thousand Xhosa died of starvation as a consequence.[5] So despairing of the destructive and demoralizing colonial presence, of the paradigm of race, the Xhosa believed Nonquawuse's false prophecy and performed sacrilegious acts that went against the very fiber of their spiritual, philosophical, economic, political, and cultural sign-systems.

Wideman reenacts this tragic moment in *Cattle Killing* in grippingly visceral terms, powerfully narrated in Great Time:

> Shoot. Chute. Black boys shoot each other. Murder themselves. Shoot. Chute. Panicked cattle funneled down the killing chute, nose pressed in the drippy ass of the one ahead. Shitting and pissing on themselves because finally, too late, they understand. Understand whose skull is split by the ax at the end of the tunnel. The cattle are the people. The people are the cattle . . . Xhosa killing their cattle, killing themselves, a world coming apart. A brave elegant African people who had resisted European invaders until an evil prophecy convinced them to kill their cattle, butcher the animals that fleshed the Xhosa's intricate dreaming of themselves. (7)

Quilted together, the narratives spill out onto each other's textual bodies. In the cosmogony of Great Time, it is not that the Xhosa killing "prophesizes" or foreshadows or explains why contemporary black children are committing genocidal acts; it is, rather, to invoke Mbiti once more, the case that we are at this "moment of intense experience" and that moment has something to say about this moment, as this moment has something to say about that one.

The narrator "Eye" seeks to understand, to glean the connection between the "shooting," the "chuting," and the subject of his book that he is en route to read from: a treatment of the yellow fever epidemic and its impact on an African-born, American-enslaved, freed itinerant preacher who (we discover) will become the central narrator of the text. Wideman writes: "The boy shot dead on the hill last night. His ancient African lad meeting his brethren as he thinks the meeting, as he unleashes himself from this

time, this moment beginning the climb to his father. What is the space they occupy now. All of them. The black boy always fifteen, the two boys freshly dying. The long-gone African. His father . . . what he shared with them . . . what he could construct, would be testimony witnessing what surrounds them both at this very moment" (13). What, then, surrounds "all of them"? We might also ask, what have "all of them" witnessed? To what do "all of them" bear witness?

In the realm of jurisprudence, to bear witness is to reveal, to testify, to provide evidence for; to witness is also to see. In the realm of the sacred, to witness is to testify as well, but it is also to arouse and inspirit—a public proclamation of faith. To witness is to tell a story, that it might serve as a warning or as inspiration. The "testimonies" of pain, the unearthing of the "hidden" and suppressed histories of African Atlantic betrayal, the despair and despondency that results in self-hatred, the testimonies of faith and survival to which "all of them" bear witness, all exist in Great Time.

At the crux of time-period collapse, Wideman's invocation of cross-temporal points of contact, simultaneous periods of racial dis-ease, is evidenced in the fact that African Atlantic subjects have during the last two hundred years, according to Eye, "all looked into the same sky, walked the same earth and thus share a world, a condition"(13). What, then, is the condition they share? In each instance, Wideman seems to suggest, there is always the material danger African Atlantic subjects face from believing false prophecies entrenched within the paradigm of race.

Revs. Allen and Jones, against their better judgment, chose to believe the fallacy of black immunity. The ideological construct upon which both contagionists and climatists pinned their flawed theory was fundamentally yoked to the doctrine of racial dis-ease. Allen and Jones, operating from positions of disempowerment, naively pinned false hope upon white philanthropy and medicine, and effectively sent black healthcare workers to their death. In a similar vein, the dispossessed Nonquawuse believes the false prophecy that is revealed to her, which ultimately results in bolstering rather than eradicating white hegemony. Nonquawuse concedes: "We'd been deceived. It was not the shade of my father's brother who spoke through me that day beside the pool. No. It was a spirit of despair grown strong inside our breasts, as the whites had grown strong in our land . . . A spirit who whispered the lies of the invaders in our ears. Who tricked us into toiling for our foes. Taught us to kill our cattle, murder ourselves"

(147). Like Allen and Jones, Nonquawuse, and by extension the Xhosa people, disempowered and despairing, fail to fully flesh out the implications of the prophecy. Although not all Xhosa killed their cattle (not all believed the false prophecy), many did. The result, as with the epidemic of dis-ease in "the city of brotherly love," Philadelphia, was material—the price, black lives.

It is, of course, the contemporary genocide among black urban youth that implicitly lies at the philosophical *heart* of Wideman's novel. If Wideman's prophetic announcement in *Fatheralong* that "we are in the midst of a second middle passage" is to be taken at face value, then *Cattle Killing* is surely the vehicle through which he gives expression to this reality. Asked to clarify the temporal trajectory of the narrative and its relationship to the novel's central theme, Wideman says: "If I could boil the book down to a sentence or two, choose one thing that I want you to come away with, it is that if you believe the lies of your enemies, this is a sure path of self-destruction. If you internalize those lies, you're on the way out. It's analogous to the 'cattle-killing' that's going on now" (Miller 6). The principal "lie," Wideman accedes, is the "myth of integration" (Miller 6). In Wideman's view, neither racial integration nor segregation concerns xenophobia. Fear of difference, of course, is the conventionally touted explanation for racism, particularly prominent in the contemporary discourse of "diversity" experts. The real lie, Wideman suggests, concerns equality. Integration brought about neither equality nor a redefined socioeconomic or political status for the majority of African Atlantic subjects (Lovelace's concept of a "half-way" or "false" freedom). According to Wideman, "it's about who's on top. That is the only historical and intellectual consistency in notions of race" (Miller 8).

What contemporary issues, then, implicitly attend the hierarchical configuration replete within the paradigm of race that might lead to an internalization of such genocidal proportions? "The myth of integration" purports an equality of access in healthcare, housing, education, employment. Five years after the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which became the catalyst for desegregation in the United States, "separate and unequal" conditions in all areas governing African Atlantic life and livelihood remain ostensibly static. In fact, African American constitutional law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that in our contemporary context *Brown* has become a metonym for the

success of integration in the midst of a social reality in which *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), metonym for the philosophy of "separate but equal," is the de facto governing precedent (282).

In other words, *Brown* becomes the symbol of a level playing field that has been chiseled, sanded, seeded, nurtured, and watered and is therefore fertile and abundant. In reality, even a fleeting glance at income levels, educational access, standardized test scores, health insurance coverage, poverty, incarceration, criminalization, and political representation, among other things, will demonstrate clear disparities and inequities that clearly fall along racial lines.

The sites of segregation today, however, have been stripped of their political efficacy and any discourse on substantive redistribution of wealth, resources, and reparative actions like Affirmative Action is principally forestalled.[6] The recent ascendancy of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States has, I suspect, transliterated the aforementioned forestalling of racial justice and equity discourses to the resolute foreclosing of them. According to several public commentators, in the post-Obama era, racism is now dead, miraculously buried after *all these years* by the sole symbolic moment of America's first black presidency.

In Wideman's purview, the generation of young African Atlantics who have been reared to believe the myth of integration, who fail to understand (and hence are unable to creatively navigate around) the structural impediments to their socioeconomic mobility, who are inundated with images of conspicuous consumption and material markers of success, turn to drugs, guns, and violence. The result of this inundation is that young African Atlantics' hypercommodified impulses, driven by a misconstrued notion of access, slam up against a social structure that is fundamentally governed by the paradigm of race.

Vulnerable poor and young black men often lack the analytical tools to unveil the myths of integration; because they operate from positions of disempowerment, naturally the allure of the "quick fix" to their financial circumstances (analogous to Nonquawuse's "quick fix" to Colonialism and Allen's "quick fix" to racial acceptance) is ineffable. When young African Atlantic subjects, in Wideman's philosophical imaginary, internalize racism, when they inferiorize their black subjectivity, they are invariably on the path to self-destruction. "Beware," Nonquawuse warns, "Beware. Do not kill your cattle. Do not speak with your enemy's tongue. *Do not fall*

asleep in your enemy's dream" (147, emphasis mine). In a society in which there are more black men incarcerated than in college, surely someone has fallen asleep in their enemy's dream.

Nonquawuse's exhortation mirrors the apocalyptic cast of Eye's preamble:

> He wanted every word of this new book to be a warning, to be saturated with the image of a devastating landscape . . . Wasn't the stench of that ravaged countryside burning his eyes, his nostrils as he trudged up Wylie Hill. His book beginning and ending here. The Xhosa, seduced by false prophecy, false promises, turning away from themselves, trying to become something else, something they could never be. Killing their cattle, destroying themselves . . . Deadly prophecy in the air again. The people desperate again, listening again. (7)

The reader discovers that "Eye" is short for "Isaiah," the narrator's true name. The Judeo-Christian prophet *Isaiah*, one will recall, warns of the impending destruction of Israel as punishment by God for Israel's having turned away from righteousness.

But the biblical book is not without hope, for Isaiah reveals that God will bless the children of Israel if they return to truth, justice, and faithfulness (*Holy Bible*, CEV). The people, desperate, vulnerable, in danger of self-destruction, in danger of believing "false prophecies," "false promises," "listening again" for answers, need an alternative story to subvert the paradigm of race, to explode its epistemological function, to resist seduction and return to "righteousness."

De-Formity

The central mistake made by the Xhosa was to believe Nonquawuse's revelations were valid because they occurred in a form that was sanctioned by their worldview—a form not unlike Western historiography or the discourse of integration. They believed ultimately, totally, quintessentially in the hegemony of *Form*. If readers, however, can deconstruct Western programming regarding Form, then they can transcend its potentially disempowering consequences. In deconstructing and democratizing Form, discourse achieves its liberatory potential. But only if readers can viscerally

experience and ultimately come to embrace constructive rather than destructive modes of discursive representation can they come to define ways of imagining themselves that release them from that which has been "prophesied." *Hence, the primacy of authority rests with our own production of meaning*.

Suspension of traditional readerly expectation is no easy task. The eruptive narratology of *Cattle Killing* hurtling disjointedly through spatial and temporal movements under the auspices of Great Time produces great anxiety. Wideman reveals that reviews of his work frequently query his refusal to order the narrative and its elements in terms that conform to convention: "I read reviews all the time where people say, 'This is exciting and innovative and I kind of like it, but why don't you punctuate? Why don't you use quotation marks? Why don't you have a linear time scheme? Why aren't your characters more identified?' . . . Or somebody just scolds me or is unhappy with one indeterminacy or one level of stuff that's unresolved" (Miller 8). In *Cattle Killing*, the narrative structure, absence of punctuation, and unannounced movements through time, person, and space are indeed disconcerting. Anticipating such creative defeats of readerly expectations, the itinerant preacher/narrator addresses his "listeners": "no, no my tales are poor untidy things. No beginning nor ends. Orphan tales whose sole virtue is that you listen" (29). Thus, readers/listeners are asked to enter an *alternative discursive space*, a space that relies upon the suspension of conventional Western epistemology. Deconstructing the borders and boundaries of Discourse, the imagination becomes, as it were, a writerly site of possibility. Narrative moves from individual talent to a diasporic, writerly communion in storytelling.

Wideman's short story "The Beginning of Homewood" provides a theoretical/philosophical articulation through which to read the narratological structure of *Cattle Killing* and the writerly production of meaning it intends to provoke: "Stories exist because of their parts and each part is a story worth telling, worth examining to find the stories it contains. What seems to ramble begins to cohere when the listener understands the process, understands that the voice seeks to recover everything, that the voice proclaims *nothing* is lost, that the listener is not passive, but lives like everything else within the story" (*Damballah* 160). In *Cattle Killing*, the intersubjective relationship between listener and story is textually enacted in those moments in which the reader/listener is overtly and directly

addressed and is invited to participate in the production of meaning: "When I omit parts of the story, do I relinquish my hold on you. When the tale jumps to a different place, where do you go. When I stumble, will you assist me, will you share the story with me, dream it all again in your own words. The parts I say, the parts I don't or can't" (38–39). The use of *direct address* in African American literary production has its roots in the slave narrative. Emancipation *depended* upon an active reader, literately engaged by the textual unfolding and so viscerally transformed by the experience of reading that he/she would be impelled to action. Thus, the genre of the slave narrative rested upon an imagined enfranchised reader. Now it is true that the black narrators of antislavery literature could not afford to be indeterminate or irresolute in terms of meaning—as in, say, Harriet Jacobs, who writes "Reader, I draw no imaginary pictures of southern homes. I am telling you the plain truth," or Mary Prince's statement, "All slaves want to be free. To be free is very sweet." In both cases, the narrators had to insist on believability and speak with definitive and unequivocal authority. And yet it seems somehow relevant to point out that Wideman's invocation and employment of direct address has deep structural, historical, and emancipatory roots.

At the end of the prologue, an admonition to the reader pleads, "hold on no matter what the bend in the river, the fabled golden junction of three great westward-flowing waterways where the tales say you will find yourself if you endure the journey" (14). There is a promise of self-actualization that attends the suspension of readerly expectation. Wideman's self-conscious construction of the reader as living "like everything else in the story" (like his narrating fugitive enslaved African predecessors before him) confers upon the reader an ineluctable defining power, the kind of defining power earlier mentioned that in Wideman's outlook is a critical component of resistance and survival.

One of the central characters in *Cattle Killing* is "kin to an Ogbanji spirit," a restless, bodiless African spirit that roams the earth, inhabiting mortal bodies and taking on various forms. In the text, this spirit takes the form of an African Atlantic woman who moves throughout the text, appearing to the itinerant preacher/narrator on several occasions, culminating with her manifestation as/in Kathryn during the latter half of the novel. "Occasionally," we are told, "as one of these powerful spirits roams the earth . . . an unlucky soul will encounter the spirit, fall in love with it,

follow the spirit forever, finding it, losing it in the dance of the spirit's trail through other people's lives" (15). Such is our narrator's lot.

In their first encounter, the narrator sees the woman on the road; she is carrying a white child, who is sick, with her. The lore later as revealed is that she has taken her master's child, who was ravaged by yellow fever, to be buried and has risked her own life in the process. The narrator reveals that there are competing versions of the tale: she is the baby's mother; the father's wife is "unfruitful"; "she is a *bozal*, fresh from the West Indies;" she is devil; she is savior (51–53).

"In Philadelphia," the narrator discloses, "numerous versions of the tale competed . . . I believed each story. My way of reckoning learned from the old African people who said *all stories are true*" (53, emphasis mine). In such culturally inflected *reckoning*, the primacy of authenticity is inevitably destabilized and fluidity of meaning is necessarily embraced. Self-reflexively the narrator queries, "Where should my story start, where end . . . what I thought I knew once had changed" (52). Such clear and unequivocal acknowledgment of the temporality of the production of meaning, narrative process, and hermeneutical engagement is radically revisionist.

As if sensing readerly discomfort with ambiguity, with the earlier remarked-upon indeterminacy the narrator/griot guides: "Sometimes when we meet to thrash out this business, going backward in the story is more important than proceeding forward" (54). Our admonition from the prologue is implicitly reiterated: "Hold on no matter the bend in the road." As the narrator guides the story backwards in time to his first sighting of the roaming African spirit, he pleads implicitly to the reader/listener, "Bear with me. Let me relate to you our first meeting, itself also strangely a return. To memory, possibility, life. As all stories are" (55).

Stories, no matter our own "cross temporal contact points," no matter our own intersections with or points of entrée into tale, are solely for the purpose of restoring us to life, to possibility, urging us toward creating empowering tales that imagine ourselves outside of the circumscriptions of Truth, Empiricism, and Western Rationality. As Wally, one of the central characters in Wideman's novel *Reuben*, asserts: "If your life's not a memory or a tale you concoct at will . . . then who are you?" (102). If we are willing to read actively, to view discursive acts as collaborative, even in the confines of a text, then we can and will be transported to the fabled golden junction, which becomes, of course, the central point along which

the three tragedies (the cattle killing, yellow fever epidemic, and black-on-black crime) coalesce. At that golden junction is one germinal phrase—and it of course is not uttered at *Cattle Killing*'s narratological center.

The phrase is granted during one of the life-enhancing conversations between the itinerant preacher/narrator and Kathryn. It is clear that Kathryn metonymically stands in for the community of readers. Like the reading/listening community who is symbolically killing its cattle, thereby killing its life force, Kathryn is ill and dying. The thread of life she holds onto is sustained and nourished by her listening to the narrator's stories. The preacher says to the dying woman (implicitly) and the narrator says to the community of readers (implicitly), "Philadelphia. Love is buried in its name you know. Love, Love, sir. Surely not during the season of plague. A most unlovely time by your word. Very little love yes. Yes. But love was there. The city would not have survived without it" (49). At the fabled golden junction is *love*. In Wideman's judgment, the condition that *all of them* share inheres in the love manifested through the exchange of stories—powerful attestations of resistance and survival. Love is made palpable through the passing on of stories and in the calling up of the ancestors across Great Time.

At the end of *Cattle Killing*, after having lost Kathryn to death and releasing the spirit inhabiting her, the spirit who precisely embodies the phantasmagoria of African Atlantic subjectivity, to roam once again, the narrator definitively distinguishes between "prophecy" and "story." This is a critical discursive delineation because on the surface both expressive forms are barely distinguishable from the other. Our narrator gives us the hermeneutical tools to perform the necessary work of unpacking:

> One day when it is time to tell the last story and I stutter because it sits like a stone in my throat and carries the weight of all of the stories told and untold I wanted to bring you as gifts, stories of my dead to keep you alive, to keep love alive, to keep me coming here [back to the writing tablet] to be with you in spite of my dead . . . I must warn you . . . there are prophecies in the air, prophecies deadlier than machines. If you deny yourselves, transform yourselves, destroy yourselves, the prophets say, a better world will be born . . . up and down the land in all the cities, there are funerals and rallies and each is a story, a celebration and mourning and letting go and gathering, different stories over and over again are that one story [Inner city violence, Xhosa cattle killing, yellow fever—the same

> story] . . . where I search for you to join you, save you, save myself, tell you my stories so my dead are not strangers . . . so they will know us and welcome us (living dead). Free us. To love. (206–7)

Prophecies are the domain of self-denial, conformity, and destruction. Stories are life producing—gifts that keep the ancestors alive so that the living may be kept alive, so that love may be kept alive, so that the future may be assured.

In the end, the challenge for Wideman and for his community of readers/listeners is *not* how to transcend History or tame and control it, how to create counterhistorical discourses that are empowering, or even how to forget a past that is as rife with pain and loss and struggle as is African Atlantic history. Rather, the quest, for Wideman at least, is how to call up a history to ensure the ancestral presence, to maintain its longevity, and in so doing craft a version, tell a story that will ultimately transform readers by viscerally moving them out of delimiting Western epistemological formations (such as Wideman's false prophecies or Glissant's single History). True liberation from the *text* potentially leads to liberation from all hierarchical modes of Western domination.

Diaspora

The itinerant preacher/narrator suffers epileptic fits. These fits destabilize him to his very core. As a consequence of his "de-formity," he loses control of his bodily functions, his mouth, and his mind. As the fits occur, every societally constructed dictate and prescribed rule, both institutional and internal, is simultaneously unmasked and subverted—so too is the text. Like the narrator's fits, the text breaks rules. It breaks institutional rules governing narrative production, governing textuality, and governing what is permissible, representable, respectable even. And the text breaks internal rules, inherently destabilizing itself, disordering itself, fracturing and fragmenting, producing vignettes of meaning.

Some epileptics experience an "aura" preceding the onset of a seizure. This aura might occur as an emanating light or a moment of intense sensory perception, be it real or imagined. The preacher/narrator's aura occurs while sitting in the backbench of St. Matthew's, the segregated church in

Radnor to which he belongs. Though apocalyptic in nature, "the fits . . . produce no supernatural powers, no tongue of flame. Only a brief sweet clarity" (73). In a similar vein, the apocryphal cast of *Cattle Killing* promises no metanarrative. What it does and can deliver are moments of "brief, sweet clarity," and perhaps this is the best discourse can achieve. The narrator begins "sta-sta-starting to sta-sta-sta-stutter" (205), and the "speaking in a strange tongue" literally begins to erupt, "the language coming apart" (205) and de-forming before our readerly eyes.

It will perhaps by now not be surprising to discover that *both* moments of epileptic seizure are described in the text as "crossings." The first occurs when the preacher/narrator comes into contact with the roaming African spirit, at the river where the *bozal* woman and white child "disappear into the lake." Since chronologically this encounter marks the second instance of their meeting, the reader is told that the narrator had "already crossed a threshold, and there was no turning back" (41). The second occurs in the clearing outside St. Matthew's where the preacher/narrator has been laid to rest after the fit by his African brethren. Here, he is more fully descriptive:

> In the clearing I witnessed two roads crossing. One for people like us, who worshipped at St. Matthew's. The other a thoroughfare frequented by our ancestors, our generations yet to be born. One highway solid earth, other air . . . Perhaps seeing the spirit road and those who traverse it meant I was on my way to join them . . . But she crossed over instead . . . Tended me. And perhaps because she tarried a moment to cool my feverish brow, perhaps she was left behind. If not left behind, suspended between her world and ours. (76)

In the African Atlantic worldview, a crossing necessarily invokes Legba, who must preside over the pathway encounter. The divine meaning and human purpose to be gleaned by inhabiting the junction cannot be apprehended or accessed by humans unless mediated by Legba. Even more significantly, the narrative description tacitly implies that the preacher/narrator has in fact actually been *mounted* by Legba. In other words, our epileptic, fitful preacher/narrator is possessed—he has been spiritually inhabited by Legba—for when Legba mounts/possesses a human being, the human's limbs often become distorted and his/her body de-formed. Possessed by Legba, the preacher/narrator signals his positionality in between

the "thoroughfare," or crossing of past, present and future and between discourse, interpretation, and praxis. For it is he who guides our quilting together of the myriad stories told in *Cattle Killing*, overtly signaling to us that ambiguity, indeterminacy, and multiplicity of perspective are indeed part and parcel of engaging and by extension producing our own radically liberating poetics.

Throughout *Cattle Killing*, via the aegis of Legba, embodied by the preacher/narrator, Wideman's open invitation to the reader to self-reflexively participate in the production of meaning is illustrative of his commitment to liberating hermeneutic assumptions from their hierarchical configurations.[7] By decentering the authority of the author and the overdeterminedness of the textual enterprise, he urges readers to seize discursive agency or, at least, to share the discursive terrain as enfranchised participants. Imbuing discourse with transformational power serves to remind us that Legba's hermeneutical process exists solely for the purposes of multiplying àshe. Àshe, the West African spirit force that is "the-power-to-make-things-happen . . . a key to futurity and self-realization" (Thompson xv) is the *sign* of creative power.

In *Cattle Killing*, Wideman strives for àshe, calling upon Legba to mediate the discursive enactment so the transformative "futurity" of African Atlantic community might indeed be assured. He only asks that we come to the crossroads of discourse open to possibility's promise. For it is only when the reader-in-collaboration arrives at the fabled golden junction, itself a crossing, that testimonies of survival are vested with the power to "break, displace, replace" the paradigm of race. Such a crossing unequivocally is *not* the kind of "carnivalesque rejoicing of celebrating the crossing and recrossing of things," so frequently seen as a marker in current critical discourse on race and culture, that Marianna Torgovnick saliently critiques. At *Legba's crossing*, material freedom is at stake. Legba understands best that a false move, the wrong move, can have devastating consequences.

In keeping with these materially inflected concerns, Wideman's *Cattle Killing* narratologically undermines and its value rests upon necessarily subverting the dictates of Western hegemony—hegemony that in its own modes of historical recounting has violently and publicly seized control of African Atlantic historical discourses. Wideman's narratology metonymically seeks to redress the brutality of Western chronology whose proverbial hand stretches far and wide through Great Time across the African

diaspora. The dualities and duplicities rife within the discourses surrounding slavery, colonialism, and *de jure* civil rights (all of which are treated in *Cattle Killing*) together ring out a warning cry as portentous as the alarm clock's sounding in the opening scene of Richard Wright's wake-up call to white America, *Native Son*. And yet, despite the hope and promise of such potentially liberating formal poetics, in the end, even for a writer as radically innovative as John Edgar Wideman is, one nagging question remains implicitly unsettled: can such a paradigm be operationalized to effect *material transformation* in the lives and livelihoods of African Atlantic subjects?

We have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note . . .

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned . . . America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream"

De Busha hab five to six horse, dem lib well, nyam belly full, lib na good house; we lib na hut . . . we pay half a dollar rent; den dem want to gib we shilling a day. Tell me now, how much lef fa ya when week out? No half a dollar lef fe you? Den wha fa buy fish? Den wuh fe gib parson? De Busha get ten shilling a day; dem want to rob we . . .

—Woodville Marshall, "Blacks' Hopes and Expectations of Emancipation"

Conclusion

Dialectics of Globalization, Development, and Discourse

In the previous five chapters, I have examined structures of narration informed by African diasporic hermeneutics. These interpretive modes provide models that imagine and work through the dialectics of race, nation, and/or national belonging and textual representation. James Weldon Johnson's struggle to articulate African American subjectivity in the face of Jim Crow segregation, rampant antiblack violence, and systemic thwarting of blacks' citizenship rights mandated that he cross the boundaries of genre, breaking free from the discursive and epistemological expectations of conventional form. Audre Lorde's *Zami* attempts to write an autobiographical African Atlantic self unfettered by conventions of autobiography; the narrative authorizes its critique of Western imperialism

by situating the African Atlantic self symbolically within the material geographies of a Grenada both revolutionary and subsequently invaded.

In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Michelle Cliff's "quilted structure" of narration tasks readers with acquiring an "African Atlantic literacy" in order to glean more fully enduring legacies of the ravages and challenges of colonialism that African Atlantic peoples face in the context of colonialism's inherited hierarchies of color and class. Earl Lovelace's *Salt* asks readers to consider what it might look like for African Atlantic peoples to in fact be "liberated" rather than "set free" and "granted Independence." Liberation from strictures of conventional Western freedom discourses provides an intriguing and multiethnic model for national development.

Liberation through Great Time and its multiple narrators and stories operationalizes democratic principles for those who remain trapped by strictures of colonial and neocolonial epistemological formations. *The Cattle Killing*, by John Edgar Wideman, imbues the act of narration with potently liberating power. As with Cliff and Lovelace before him, Wideman's readers are imbricated directly within the creation of a narratology of black subjectivity. They are liberated from conventional Western epistemology and, in particular, Western exegetical formations.

All of these texts, to varying degrees, rely upon African Atlantic paradigms that impact the production of meaning and oversee the process of interpretation. African Atlantic literacy inheres in entities, concepts, and processes such as the Legba Principle, àshe, Great Time, quilting, and jazz. The narratives of Johnson, Lorde, Wideman, Lovelace, and Cliff are energized by ruptures, fissures, and formal departures that fundamentally challenge Western logocentricity. They create multivocal quiltings for new national possibilities. Our own energetic interpretive engagement with such narratological arrivals and departures precisely necessitates our development of African Atlantic literacy. Such literacy (as I have argued in the introduction) includes recognizing and recouping the literal (and frequently suppressed) history of black resistance to white hegemony; resistance to linear, cause-and-effect simplifications replete within "official" versions of African Atlantic history; and self-conscious resistance to any propensity to impose upon African Atlantic narratives the valued and normalizing expectations of Western epistemological and hermeneutical traditions.

What is at stake for African Atlantic narrative is not a role in postmodernist narratological play but an extension and deepening of a very different and long-standing tradition of black narrative. For these narratives are most actively energized by their resonant accounts of the failures of symbolic historical moments to actualize their promises of black liberation. Johnson's text clearly demonstrates the failure of the U.S. nation fully to deliver the promises of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution; his text indicts, in its symbolic energies, the abysmal failure of Reconstruction. In many ways, Wideman's narrative both precedes and continues where Johnson leaves off—profoundly demonstrating the perpetually devastating consequences of the paradigm of race throughout the African diaspora. Lorde, Cliff, and Lovelace alternatively unveil the failed praxis inherent in national discourses of Emancipation, Independence, and Sovereignty.

Why, we might ask, is it the case that some fifty years after landmark historical victories—such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (central tenets of which were overturned on June 28, 2007, by the Supreme Court of the United States) or independence movements throughout the Anglophone Caribbean, where many countries will celebrate fifty years of independence in a few years—and over two hundred years after the 1807 abolition of the slave trade in Britain are we still grappling with and seeking to address issues of national development, racial inequality, black disenfranchisement, and the persistence of poverty, violence, and exploitation (both state and internationally sanctioned) in the lives of working class black people throughout the global South? Critics of anticolonial nationalism argue that the failure of the postcolonial nation-state and Black Nationalism to deliver on their promises lies in their ineluctable replication of formations that their ideological postures and programs of intervention sought historically to critique.[1] In the instance of both the postcolonial nation-state and Black Nationalism, the underlying assumption of seemingly liberatory critique is that once governments are "free" to govern, or once blacks in America are able to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizens, the putatively "new people" failed to imagine themselves out of the very paradigms that had historically oppressed them. Fanon's "New Man" is immediately reincarnated, and, one might add, "re-incarcerated" by his own failures of imagination.

Undoubtedly, a glaring deficiency of nationalist discourse is its failure (or refusal) to retheorize and replace patriarchal imperatives with a more gender-equitable praxis. Interrogating such epistemological failings, however, does not, I think, preclude considering what have been the actual *material* conditions within which legal and much vaunted freedoms have been "granted" and new epistemologies "declared." What, we might ask, have been viable arenas for black liberation to be actualized in fact? It seems relevant by way of response to recall Paget Henry's notion of the problematic hierarchical configurations of mythopoetic discourses over and against those of politico-economics in the stories of African Atlantic subjectivity. Current postnational discourses usually point to the limitations of "race" as a paradigm around which to effect tangible social, political, and economic transformations. And yet, while I think we can all concede the inadequacies of nationalist discourses and their praxes, there remains the unsettling reality of dire politico-economic circumstances in which vast numbers of black people throughout the world continue to find themselves incarcerated.

Rather than attributing the persistence of black working-class austerity in the African Atlantic to the failure of black nationalist movements, I would like to end by highlighting the enduring dialectic between symbolic freedom and material enfranchisement as they have been encoded in narratives of Emancipation, Civil Rights, and Independence from the nineteenth century to a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision. This dialectic is, of course, meticulously explored in Johnson's, Lorde's, Cliff's, Lovelace's, and Wideman's works. Lovelace's *Salt*, as I have shown, treats the challenges attending the dialectic between symbolic freedom and material enfranchisement, always foregrounding their inextricability. Emancipation is achieved, "but now they had another problem: it was not how to keep people in captivity. It was how to set people at liberty" (7).

The narratives analyzed in the foregoing pages all foreground a problematic of what one might call "freedom in action." The project and phrase, "setting" the newly emancipated slaves "at liberty," raises to my mind key material concerns. Abolition in the Empire came twenty-seven years after slavery was abolished in Britain. Even then, black subjects were granted only "gradual emancipation." It was, as Lovelace's character JoJo so aptly rails against the Queen, "a kind of a half-way freedom." In the public imagination and certainly in imaginative metahistories of black liberation,

the moment of emancipation (a day, because in the imaginative construction emancipation was bestowed in "one day") is paradoxically marked as the proverbial "second coming" for the New World black subject.

It is this disjuncture between symbol and material in the popular imagination and registered history that helps account, I think, for the enduring esteem so many hold for works like Alex Haley's *Roots*. The miniseries *Roots* (1977), in its heady gloss of *immediate freedom* and finish and of blacks coated in utter family joy, remains enduringly popular. *Roots* ends with resonant images of newly emancipated slaves westward bound, perched to stake their claim as fully enfranchised citizens.[2]

The tumultuous history of Reconstruction and subsequent brutal struggles for full participation and inclusion of African Americans in U.S. national life as citizens gives the lie to the mythic economy of *Roots*. Millions of dollars in reparations were paid to the planter class by the British crown in the Anglophone colonies, a brute material fact that has all but disappeared from our popular and registered history. Yet, bestowed with "half-way freedom," formerly enslaved Africans received *nothing* that was god-given—not freedom, resources, or a second coming. African Americans received no forty acres, no mule.[3] The consequences—even set against the mythic grandiosity of the emancipation project—are, of course, *material*. The enslaved were set at liberty against an economic backdrop of white hegemony. It seems clear to me that when most refuse seriously to engage debt forgiveness, affirmative action, and reparations for slavery, the literate African Atlantic has no choice but to revisit key symbolic, historical moments of the imagination's failure. Certainly, such revisitation is a chief motivating force for the foregoing pages.

* * *

There are two enduring symbols in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech; one is a dream, the other a check. We are all familiar with the dreamscape of King's speech, but I'd like to recall the specificity of the language surrounding King's invocation of the check. King begins thus: "We have come to our nation's capital to cash a check . . . America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds' . . . so we have come to cash this check . . ." (80).

It is no coincidence that of the two symbols, the one that endures is the *dream*—the existential achievement of a futuristic utopic reality that

is marked by racial harmony. The symbol that has essentially disappeared from public imagination is the *check*—the material, physical, and commercial reminder of the realities attending historical and contemporary black dispossession and disenfranchisement. In the narratological trajectory of his speech, King begins with the check and ends with the dream. The subtext here, it seems to me, is that African Atlantic peoples are still waiting for that check—"a good check," a check that assures the full enfranchisement of all black subjects. As Lovelace reminds us, before there can be address, there must be redress. King's speech yokes the material and the symbolic in unequivocal terms. It is in homage to this sensibility that I offer my final autobiographical thoughts.

When I was a teenager growing up in Jamaica, I lived in the city of Kingston, and every summer I would grudgingly go to the "country" to visit my family. My aunt Mae and uncle Willie owned a farm. One summer during the early 1980s, I embarked on my regular vacation excursion but on *this* visit Aunt Mae made me french fries with every meal. Of course I loved this at first, as "fries" were much more "sophisticated" and appetizing than our usual fare of "rice and peas"; but she made them at *every meal*. At breakfast, at lunch, at dinner. I ate them with eggs, with chicken, with everything! By the time I returned home, I did not want to see another french fry.

What I did not realize then was that the importation of foreign potatoes as a consequence of trade agreements signed by the Jamaican government in return for loans had decimated the local potato market. Aunt Mae and Uncle Willie had nowhere to sell their potatoes. The farm was eventually sold and shortly after Uncle Willie died. His livelihood, his life's work, was crushed by the realities of the "new" globalized economy. In Jamaican vernacular, death is pronounced "det"—homologous with "debt." Life and debt are often quite literally a matter of life and death.

Despite the fact that globalization, underpinned by neoliberalism and free market economics, is presented in the present era as primarily a *fait accompli*, an irreversible tenet of progress, a proverbial "fact of life," I am not ready to concede the declaration of its inevitability and immortality.[4] There is a literacy of dissent to be found in so many African Atlantic narratives that may, at first blush, seem altogether ironically "domesticated to the global." I have worked to suggest a literacy to read and awaken them to new purpose in our trying times in the foregoing pages.

When I first conceived this book, I decided upon the title *Legba's Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic* as a gesture that might capture the ways in which black writers intentionally cross the borders and boundaries of genre. As I look back over the chapters, I am inclined to change the title to *African Atlantic Crosses*, for, in Jamaican vernacular, "crosses" means problems and bad luck, as in "what a crosses pon me!" In African American vernacular "crosses," as in "I got me some crosses to bear," are challenges, burdens that are borne on the backs of the dispossessed. The histories and current politico-economic realities for vast numbers of African Atlantics living throughout the diaspora could easily be characterized as a series of crosses. And yet, Johnson, Lorde, Cliff, Lovelace, and Wideman all attest to the indomitability of the African Atlantic spirit while at the same time clearly situating that spirit of resistance within inescapable politico-economic spheres.

I suppose some will argue that I optimistically vest the writerly process with a tangible liberational power that cannot really be materially measured. Can a shrewdly crafted textual aporia really jolt us into a new material praxis? When Wideman speaks of "life stories" as imbued with the power to give the lie to the paradigm of race, is his creative investment materially transformational? The truth is I remain hopeful yet unsure. What I do know for sure, though, is that it is only through arduous interrogation of form that liberation is achievable. Form is inherently ideological. Ideological shifts that inform praxis thus necessitate a transformation of our relationships to form. Legba, who inhabits the interstices of meaning and interpretation and inaugurates praxis, is the African Atlantic sign of such radical reformulations. In guiding those who are open to such divination to strive for the àshe that might secure our futurity, Legba asks only that we are open to possibility's promise.

As we work hard to make sense of the formal discourses that daily surround notions of the free market, terrorism, national security, the Third World, AIDS, genocide, secure borders, globalization, global warming, war, and immigration, I am reminded of Nonquawuse's warning: "do not fall asleep in your enemy's dream." Our salvation in the end may abide in our reclaiming the power to name, to define, to imagine, and to create, unrestricted and unbounded. In this vein we may end where all creation begins: *Àshe*.

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NOTES

Introduction

1. See Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 98–99.

2. William Andrews issues "this call" in his essay "A Poetics of Afro-American Autobiography," 80.

3. Frederic Jameson describes genres as "literary institutions, or social contracts." According to Jameson, generic rules are typically agreed upon by both writer and reading public (*Political Unconscious* 106).

4. Glissant capitalizes the "H" in History to refer specifically to dominant and officially sanctioned Western notions of history, which are conventionally presented as linear and chronological and are typically marked by Western ethnocentricity. My subsequent usage of "History," "history," and/or "histories" is intentional and tropes on Glissant's ideologically inflected usage.

5. See Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse,* 69–70.

6. Gloria Anzalduà's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987); Homi Bhabha's "DissemiNation: Time, Narration, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration,* ed. Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Benìtez Rojo's, *The Repeating Island* (Durham: Duke University, 1992) are a small sampling of the emphasis in postcolonial studies on margins, borders, and crossings.

7. Simon Gikandi argues that "the Caribbean imagination is sustained by the tug of both Europe and Africa," the former of which he aligns with an "imposed metropolitan identity" (10).

8. See Michael Thelwell's "Modernist Fallacies and the Responsibility of the Black Writer," in *Duties, Pleasures* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) for an antimodernist critique.

9. Edward Brathwaite's "Limbo," in *The Arrivants* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), is the poem that influences Wilson Harris's configuration of the limbo dance as a metaphor for Caribbean modernity. "History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas," in *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, ed. A. J. M. Bundy. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

10. For more information on Esu-Elegbara/Eshu/Legba and their aspects see Gates's *Signifying Monkey* and Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*.

11. Ayodele Ogundipe argues that although Esu and Legba serve the same role for both the Yoruba and the Fon, Legba's phallic characterization and hypersexuality appears to be more pronounced than Esu's. In Karla Holloway's *Moorings and Metaphors,* she argues that Gates understates Esu as a "phallic god of generation and fecundity" and insists that he is renowned for his sexual misconduct (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992). Ogundipe rejects the idea that Esu is a "phallic deity," arguing instead that one cannot use Western interpretations of West African iconography to arrive at conclusions about gender/sexuality construction. She further cautions readers, however, to not simply accept Legba's hypersexualized characteristics at face value, since other characteristics of Esu and Legba, such as their roles as trickster and status as demonic, are also misrepresentations. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Eshu embodies male and female aspects. Erik Davis argues that Eshu and Legba are essentially the same and he (like Gates) uses them interchangeably in his work. He does, however, suggest that Eshu is a more "malevolent being" than Legba. For more information see Ogundipe, "Esu Elegbara." See also Davis, "Who Is Eleggua?" 4–6.

12. Houston Baker reads the exigencies of the deconstructionist scholar attuned to "vernacular possibilities" as akin to that of a "liminal trickster" (*Blues* 200). Wilson Harris reads the Caribbean modern poet/artist as necessarily risking convention and becoming a kind of discursive "trickster of limbo" ("History, Fable, and Myth" 166).

13. The following is a sample of publications, in addition to Pelton's and Gates's, devoted to the Trickster: Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); William Hynes and William Doty, *Mythical Trickster Figures* (University of Alabama Press, 1997); Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (North Point Press, 1999); and Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (Schocken, 1987).

14. See Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* 18.

15. I am troping on C. L. R. James's title from his book on cricket, politics, and colonialism, *Beyond a Boundary* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993; first published 1963).

16. See Baraka, *Blues People*.

17. See Boyce Davies and Savory Fido, *Out of the Kumbla* 6.

18. Gikandi makes the case that the "limbo" space within which Caribbean writers create—though anxiety producing—is reliant upon such angst to generate the kinds of modernist interventions it invariably produces and relies upon in order to discursively interrogate colonialism and postcolonialism.

19. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*.

20. Tobin and Dobard's *Hidden in Plain View* has been the subject of hot contestation. Outside of the central question of veracity, as a discursive model, I find their study quite useful. I am troping here, then, on Tobin's and Dobard's title.

21. I borrow the concept from Frederick Douglass's classic fugitive slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), in which he describes his acquisition of literacy as "the pathway to freedom."

22. I am referring to Roland Barthes's notion of the writerly text, within which the reader produces textual meaning.

23. Naturally, there are several exceptions to this convention. For example, despite its title, Belinda Edmondson's *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority and Women's Writing in Caribbean Narrative* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999) and Arlene Keizer's *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004) are notable in this regard.

24. I focus on Anglophone writers certainly not because I believe their texts singular in their proclivities toward formal innovation. However, the narrative concerns of Francophone and Hispanophone writers fall outside of the scope of my research here. I recognize fully and take responsibility for this scholarly gap.

25. See Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 19.

Chapter One. Race, Citizenship, and Form

An earlier version of this chapter, titled "Form, Renewal and the 'Law of Race': Revising Critical Judgments of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*," appeared in *African American Review* 40.2 (Summer 2006).

1. The mentioned descriptions of the narrative appear in an article by John Sheehy, "The Mirror and the Veil."

2. Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) holds the distinction of being the first African American text to deliberately mask itself using the framework of a confessional narrator.

3. In *From Behind the Veil*, Robert Stepto concurs that the ex-colored man is an antihero (105).

4. See Tate, "Allegories" 100–107. Tate discusses the discourse surrounding what she terms the "black [male] heroic liberational" project in relation to black women's participation in acts of liberation that reimagine and reconstitute acts of subversion in black feminist terms.

5. I am referring here to Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," published in *The Nation* in 1926.

6. Gates directly links the West African Esu-Elegbara to the African American "Signifying Monkey" (xxi).

7. William Andrews makes this point in his introduction to *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (xviii).

8. I am italicizing "framing" to emphasize Baker's usage of the term in *Turning South Again* as a reminder of the "always already" and firmly entrenched raced social arrangements.

9. The turning point of his "career as a slave," signaled by his physical fight with Covey, is also evidence of the gendered implications of Douglass's narrative constructions.

10. Carby makes this point in *Race Men* (12–13).

11. Carby argues in *Race Men* that Du Bois challenges "Washington's standing as

an intellectual and as a race leader" while simultaneously undermining the Tuskegee power broker's masculinity (39).

12. Washington was instrumental in helping Johnson secure his first Consul-General post in Puerto Cabello in 1905. Levy further contends that Johnson's decision not to join Du Bois's *Niagara Movement* after being asked to join by Du Bois himself "clearly placed him in the Washington camp." However, Levy also insists that Johnson was among many of the younger generation of blacks who "admired Washington for his ability, even though some of them disliked his methods." Levy, *James Weldon Johnson* 103–4.

13. In her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers explores the impact of the hegemonic structure governing filial relations during U.S. slavery.

14. See Sheehy, "The Mirror and the Veil." Also see Somerville, *Queering the Color Line,* 111–30. See too Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Cheryl Clarke, "Race, Homosocial Desire and 'Mammon' in Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," in *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Bonnie Zimmerman (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995). All of the aforementioned treat the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in *The Autobiography*.

15. I recognize that this formulation does not take into account working-class African American values that oft-times problematized and queried the dominant discourse espoused by black leaders like Alain Locke and Du Bois, among others, particularly in relation to the "talented tenth" theory. Still, the public influence on representing "the race man" and his merits, in letters at least, is a foregone conclusion.

16. Siobham Somerville, in *Queering the Color Line*, cogently argues that in his narrative creations Johnson employs "the iconography of gender inversion . . . The narrator is . . . distinctly feminized recalling descriptions of the highly eroticized mulatta of nineteenth century fiction" (112–13). This gender inversion operates in terms of setting as well, for Johnson places the protagonist squarely and comfortably within the domestic sphere.

17. I am conscious of conflating "feminization" with "emasculation"; however, I argue that this formulation is endemic of the prevailing consciousness of the time.

18. For further discussion of the construction of white male heteronormativity during this period see Yacovone, "Abolitionists and the 'Language of Fraternal Love'" 80.

19. It does seem important to note that Johnson had a "patron"—his employer Dr. Summers, in whose medical office Johnson worked. Johnson describes him in a hauntingly similar way to the depiction of the patron in *The Autobiography*: Dr. Summers also said, "That will do," the exact phrase that according to the narrator signals the end of his piano-playing duties. Johnson's text contains several coincidental likenesses drawn from his own experiences.

20. See Somerville. See also Harper and Clarke, cited above.

21. Somerville appears to make a case for a queer reading, at least of the relationship between the narrator and the millionaire, based upon the connection of Van Vechten,

who was openly gay, to the 1927 republication of *The Autobiography*. Somerville suggests that the narrative was received more openly at this time. The argument that Johnson had an agenda to make homosexual and interracial desire "more palpable" to the contemporary audience seems to overlook two key issues: one, the narrator is an antihero; and two, the relationship in question is clearly meant to be ironic and hence subject to critique.

22. Critic Bernard Bell argues that "this achievement of personal wholeness is at best an ambiguous Pyrrhic victory" (90).

23. The language in this section recalls Du Bois's detached, sociological description of the social classes within the black community, which he provides in chapter 9 of *Souls of Black Folk*.

24. I am borrowing this section's title from William Andrews's critical work of the same name.

25. Even in his biography of Johnson, Levy asserts, "Those who have discussed the work in the sixty years since its publication usually call it a novel; yet *The Autobiography* rests uneasily in that genre" (128). This notion of "unease" with the many-faceted acts of representation embedded within the narrative is reflected in the critical debate that seeks to affix a singular meaning to Johnson's work.

26. Leigh Gilmore makes this point in "Mark of Autobiography" (6).

27. Historical essays related to this topic include Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art; Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and Racial Mountain" (*The Nation*, June 1926); Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (*The World Tomorrow*, May 1928); Richard Wright's, "Blue-Print for Negro Writing" (*New Challenge*, 1937); James Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel," in *Notes of A Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); and Maulana Karenga's "Black Art," in *Black Poets and Prophets*, ed. King and Anthony (New York: Mentor Press, 1972).

28. See Jane Campbell's *Mythic Black Fiction* (Knoxville: University of Knoxville Press, 1987) in which she explores another side of this paradigm; she discusses the function of mythmaking in black fictions that take up the issue of history. Arguing that Romance is the dominant mode for this kind of representation, Campbell proposes that Romance becomes a highly subversive and "radical literary mode" of transforming reality.

Chapter Two. The Poetics of Biomythography

1. This quote is taken from the acknowledgments in *Zami*.

2. A close corollary to "Zami" would be the use of "battyman" in Jamaica, which is used pejoratively to describe a gay man.

3. In the following references to *Zami*, I use "Audre" to distinguish between the narrator of the biomythographic work and the author Audre Lorde, who wields control over the text's discursive arrangement.

4. See Carlston's "*Zami* and the Politics of Plural Identity."

5. Raynaud, in "A Nutmeg Nestled inside the Covering of Mace," points out that

the constructed linearity of the autobiographical narrative is interrupted by poems that date Lorde's autobiographical text. Raynaud also highlights Lorde's use of italics and songs as apparatuses that give texture to her narrative and serve to anchor the narrator in time (230–33).

6. According to Robert Pelton, "Aflakete" literally means "I have tricked you" (72). See also Ball, "Old Magic and New Fury" and Provost's "Becoming Afrekete." Both essays discuss Lorde's revisioning of Eshu/Legba as Afrekete.

7. Both Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* and Robert Farris Thompson in *Flash of the Spirit* discuss, in their respective texts, the "janus-faced" aspect of the divine creator Mawu-Lisa, a deity that is both female (Mawu) and male (Lisa), for the Fon. In Haiti, Erzulie, who is female, is sometimes paired with Legba.

8. An African praisesong is sung in tribute to a god, person, or object. The praisesong includes the introduction of the god/person/object by name and then encompasses a series of laudatory epithets or descriptive terms that are uttered to pay homage.

9. Keating conceives of Lorde's invocation of the divine black goddess Afrekete as a "revolutionary call to action" to subvert the hegemony of patriarchal myth (29).

10. This section's title is taken from a slogan of the Grenada Revolution of March 13, 1979: "Forward Ever, Backward Never."

11. For further discussion of this idea of Lorde's potential reinscription of the patriarchal/colonial gaze see Anatol's "Border Crossings in Audre Lorde's *Zami*" and Ball.

Chapter Three. Race, Nation, and the Imagination

1. Paget Henry points to the propensity to prioritize the "mythopoetic over the politico-econonomic" in *Caliban's Reason* 111.

2. I am certainly not suggesting that politically motivated and incited violence ended in Jamaica in the early 1980s. To argue this would be disingenuous. But I would argue that the direct linkage between political campaigning and the development of garrison communities was a central feature of this period.

3. Manley resumed the post of prime minister again in 1989.

4. In an article published in 1989, some two years after *No Telephone* was published, social scientist Carl Stone argues that from the perspective of the Jamaican public "social justice" and "populist commitment to the poor" endure as the ideological symbols most commonly associated with Manley and the PNP. See "Power, Policy and Politics" 48.

5. Such penalties were meted out through thwarted and impossible lending agreements fomented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank through CIA operations and through a U.S.-led smear campaign that unequivocally fueled a "red scare," ultimately resulting in mass migration particularly from the elite and professional classes. For many throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, the role and range of the Central Intelligence Agency in the destabilization of so-called leftist regimes is the subject of much debate. Many of the documents related to the period between 1953 and 1973 that were sealed were declassified in June 2007. Between 1976

and 1977, articles in *Newsweek* (Feb. 1977), the *New York Times* (Jan. 1976), and the *Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 1976) fanned the "red scare" flames with numerous innuendos and misrepresentations of the relationship between Jamaica and Cuba. In the midst of escalating political violence, the consequence on foreign-earning producing industries like tourism was ineffable. See the *Daily Gleaner* (Jamaica, Feb. 26, 1977) for responses to the *Newsweek* article. For more detailed discussion of this period see Anthony Payne, *Politics in Jamaica* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1994). See also Beckford and Witter, *Small Garden*.

6. Prime Minister Edward Seaga was the first head of government to visit the newly elected President Ronald Reagan in the White House. See *Time*, Monday, Feb. 2, 1981.

7. See Stone, "Power, Policy and Politics" 48.

8. In Jamaica "helper" is the name used to refer to a domestic worker.

9. Frantz Fanon has already clearly demonstrated the connection between anticolonial resistance against repressive regimes and an attendant surge in mental illness. See Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*.

10. "Rhygin" is the Jamaican name for a restless, violent, and rebellious spirit, but it also comes from the notorious Jamaican criminal of the same name.

11. This phrase is taken from the title of one of Cliff's works in *The Land of Look Behind*.

12. See Barnes, "Resisting Cultural Cannibalism," 23–31, and Schwartz's "Imagined Communities." Both Barnes and Schwartz discuss in detail the ways in which Cliff's narratives disrupt the traditional bildungsroman.

13. Such strategy is described by Gayatri Spivak as "strategic essentialism," although Spivak has also suggested that the term has been misused and misappropriated. See Spivak's "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Subaltern Studies,* ed. Ramajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

14. In these Maroon communities, Africans, some formerly enslaved, some fugitive, and some free, lived together, provided safe haven for runaways, and launched numerous successful attacks upon British colonial forces beginning as early as 1655, when Jamaica became a British colony. These communities are still existent and have indigenous peoples' status in relation to the state.

15. The historical Nanny led the Maroons in a series of successful battles against British forces during the eighteenth century, principally between 1720 and 1739. In 1739, under the leadership of Cudjoe, the Maroons signed a peace treaty with the British in which the Maroons agreed to discontinue launching attacks against the British and to return enslaved persons who ran away, agreeing in fact to assist in these escaped slaves' recapture. Historical evidence suggests that Nanny was adamantly opposed to this compromise. In historical accounts of this period, Nanny was both revered by her people and greatly feared by the British.

16. Angela Davis points to the dearth of black women in the historiography of rebellions and physical resistance to enslavement in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3.4 (Dec 1971): 2–15.

17. Papa Legba is frequently depicted with a humped back and carrying a walking stick.

18. See Dash, "In Search of the Lost Body" 332–35.

Chapter Four. Jazz Imaginings of the Nation-State

An earlier version of this chapter, titled, "The Democratization of Narration: Considering Earl Lovelace's *Salt*," appeared in *Contours: A Journal of the African Diaspora* 3.1 (Spring 2005). Copyright 2005 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Used with permission of the University of Illinois Press.

1. Demographic information taken from: www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos.td.html.

2. The islands of Trinidad and Tobago are united as the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, a designation achieved in 1976. In 1803 the island of Tobago was ceded to the British and in 1889 Tobago was placed under the administrative control of Trinidad as part of its Crown Colony operations. Although I recognize that in my foregoing references to "Trinidad" and not "Trinidad and Tobago" I may be perhaps guilty of privileging the earlier hierarchical formation that governed the two islands, I refer to the island of Trinidad specifically in this chapter because *Trinidad* is the specific locale where the narrative action is enacted. My usage also stands in contrast to my use of "Grenada and the Grenadines" in chapter 2; however, the narrative action within Lorde's texts invokes both Grenada and the Grenadine island of Carriacou.

3. See Selwyn Cudjoe, *Resistance and Caribbean Literature* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), 275, for a discussion of what he terms the "democratic sentiment" of the Caribbean novel.

4. See Williams's *History*, 101–5.

5. See Klass, *East Indians in Trinidad*.

6. In his study, Klass reveals that many East Indians recounted being tricked by recruiters. I also want to qualify that my comparative reference between East Indians and Africans regarding "choice" recognizes that the full exercise of agency is relative when measured in economic terms and also with regards to the recruitment and "marketing" practices in India of the indenture enterprise. I am no ways minimizing the fact that Indian laborers were (to use sociological terms) "pushed out" by dire economic/caste conditions and "pulled" by the allure of false promises. Cited above.

7. In chapter 5, I elaborate more fully on this point.

8. Puri makes this critical point in *The Caribbean Postcolonial*, describing the dialectical negotiation between hybridity and homogeneity as "the grounding paradox of many Caribbean nations" (48).

9. I am referring to the African proverb that says, "Until the lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter."

10. Lovelace makes this point in a speech published in Aiyejina's *Earl Lovelace* (163).

11. JoJo's flogging upon denouncing the "apprenticeship" clause written into the British Crown's Emancipation package is based upon a historical event in which "half-emancipated slaves" on August 1, 1834, protested in front of the Government House. Seventeen of the most prominent leaders of the protest were arrested and sentenced to hard labor and public flogging. See Williams, *History* 88.

12. The characterization of Alford George as a "gradual hero" is similar to other characterizations in Lovelace's texts. See Aldrick in *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979) and Bee in *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982).

13. These are actual quotes from *Salt*'s chapter entitled "Ethelbert Tannis." The Tannis section examines specific historical documents and events that are germane to Bango/JoJo's stories.

14. This line is, of course, spoken by Shakespeare's Caliban from *The Tempest* to Prospero, who, upon landing on the island, kills Caliban's mother Sycorax. Thus Caliban is here articulating his birthright/ownership claims.

15. Supriya Nair argues that Lovelace's reparative proposition only reifies racial exclusivity if one looks at black dispossession through the lens of race and not through the lens of a complex history of slavery (280).

16. See Abena Busia's provocative essay "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female," *Cultural Critique* 14 (Winter 1989–1990): 81–104. Busia argues that the African woman (read postcolonial female subject) is in both the male colonial and anticolonial text "actually constructed as being essentially absent from any locus of dramatic action or power" (86). In *Salt*, both Bango and Alford are partnered with powerful Afro-Trinidadian women, Bango with Myrtle and Alford with Florence. But they rest uneasily vis-à-vis the "locus of dramatic action [and] power." Florence and Myrtle speak loudly and clearly and are indeed integral to the evolution of the narrative and their partners' development, but they do so primarily in private and not in public. Interrogating the exclusion of Caribbean women's voices from the historiography, literature, and social movements within the public political sphere is work that remains unfinished.

17. Miles Davis apparently used to say, "Don't play what's there; play what's not there."

18. By way of example, I would point to Gloria Naylor's richly evocative *Bailey's Café* (1992). *Bailey's Café* is a novel that self-consciously signals its use of jazz as its principal tropological element. Bailey, the "maestro" who guides us through the painful, heart-wrenching tales of physical abuse, sadism and psychological trauma that the female characters endure as a consequence of patriarchal hegemony, at a particular juncture, steps aside during the narrative and is purposely silent. His wife Nadine intercedes disclosing the story of a fourteen-year-old pregnant Ethiopian Jewish virgin Mariam, who has been subjected to genital mutilation. Hers is a brutal tale that ends with her baby's birth and her death by drowning. The chapter, "Mary (Take Two)" begins thus: "You already know that my name is Nadine, and my husband's told you that I don't like to talk. I've only agreed to set this one up . . . *This isn't a story that any man*

can tell" (143, emphasis mine). I would argue that the "maestro" in *Salt* purposely steps aside to let Adolphe and Sonan *own* their stories.

19. Lovelace's invocation of Daaga is twofold, signifying on the nineteenth-century insurrectionist as well as invoking one of the leaders of the 1970 Trinidadian Black Power resistance movement: Geddes Granger, who took the name Mandakal Daaga in homage to his revolutionary ancestor.

20. Trinidadian political history has been in some ways tumultuous, although, I suppose, no less tumultuous than that of other postcolonial nations. Historically, politics have generally broken down along ethnic lines, with Afro-Trinidadians supporting the PNM and Indo-Trinidadians supporting various Indian-majority parties, such as the United National Congress (UNC) or its predecessors. Such ethnocentricity, however, has not been totalizing. After Williams's death, the PNM remained in power, but its thirty-year rule ended in 1986 when the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), a rainbow party aimed at Trinidadians of both African and Indian descent, won a landslide victory by capturing 33 of 36 seats. Then, Tobago's A. N. R. Robinson, the NAR political leader, became prime minister. In 1988, the NAR began to lose its Indian support, and Basdeo Panday, leader of the old United Labor Front (ULF), formed the new opposition with the UNC. In the 1991 elections, the NAR lost control of the government to the PNM, led by Patrick Manning. The Panday-led UNC finished second and replaced the NAR as chief opposition party. This history of ethnic dominance in the respective parties came to a head in 1995 when Manning called for elections and the PNM and UNC both won seventeen seats, with the NAR winning two seats. UNC allied with the NAR and formed the new government, with Panday becoming prime minister—the first Trinidadian prime minister of East Indian descent. Elections held in 2000 returned the UNC to power, but the UNC fell in 2001 when three UNC parliamentarians defected. Subsequent elections resulted in an even 18–18 split between the UNC and the PNM. The inability to break the tie delayed the parliament from meeting and sent the nation of Trinidad and Tobago into heightened political turmoil. Elections were held in 2002 and 2007, and the PNM, under Manning, was returned to power each time.

21. Throughout the last decade, references to the removal of the dragon as a metaphor for government corruption can be consistently found in the *Trinidad Guardian*.

Chapter Five. Dis-ease, De-formity, and Diaspora

1. Frederick Douglass describes his newfound understanding of "literacy" as "the pathway to freedom" in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).

2. For two excellent accounts of the relationship between Rush, Allen, Jones, and Carey, see Phillip Gould's essays, "Race, Commerce, and the Literature of Yellow Fever" and "Rhetoric and Identity in Absalom Jones and Richard Allen's *Narrative of the Proceedings*," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 200 (Jan/Apr 2001).

3. In addition to Gould, on this point, see also Brooks's *American Lazarus*.

4. For more information on George Stubbs, see Morrison, *Art of George Stubbs*.

5. For an excellent account of the Xhosa cattle killing see Stapleton, " 'They No Longer Care for Their Chiefs'" 383–92.

6. I am thinking about the recent furor during the presidential election over Barack Obama's comments to "Joe the Plumber" about "sharing the wealth" and the labeling of these comments pejoratively as "socialist."

7. According to Erik Davis in *"Who Is Eleggua?"* Legba is most closely associated with the pagan European deity Hermes, from whom Hermeneutics is derived (4).

Conclusion

1. See Hintzen's essay "Rethinking Democracy", 404. Hintzen discusses the ideological failings of nationalist movements in the Caribbean. See also Robinson's treatment of historical emergences of "black nationalisms" throughout the twentieth century in *Black Nationalism*.

2. Marlon Riggs' richly suggestive documentary *Color Adjustment* makes this point.

3. I am of course referring to the compensation of forty acres and a mule that was to be given to freed African Americans after slavery ended in 1865. After the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and upon the assumption of the presidency by Andrew Jackson, the order for land reparations was revoked and those African Americans that had been given land were forced to return it.

4. For a discussion of the ways in which counterglobalization discourses are summarily dismissed, see Branislav Gosovic's "Intellectual Hegemony."

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